

Southern New Hampshire University

Detecting Women:  
Cultural Evolution in Detective Fiction

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By

Marian E. Vasquez

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### Abstract

Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh are the universally acknowledged Queens of Crime from the Golden Age of detective fiction. However, despite being ruled by female authors, this genre—now known as the “cozy”—is often criticized for its conservative portrayal of women’s roles in society, as well as other social issues. The popularity of their work has waxed and waned over the years, but their writing continues to speak to readers today. This paper argues that each author’s work reflects the social issues of their time and provides subtle commentary that continues to influence writers of detective fiction today. Modern detective fiction continues to reflect our views of women in society through the decisions authors make when crafting their plots and characters, just as today’s social dynamics echo those of the interwar period.

Keywords: detective fiction, Golden Age, feminism, social issues, women in society, Detection Club, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers, cozy mysteries

## **Detecting: An Introduction**

Throughout my childhood, I was surrounded by books. My parents were both scholars, and there were the piles of ponderous tomes that one would expect in such a household. However, the books that were most often cast about on every available flat surface were not treatises on obscure subjects—they were Golden Age detective fiction. From my earliest years, I was just as exposed to Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers as I was to Jane Austen and William Shakespeare. These stories were part of the tapestry of our lives, and it was not until I became an adult and a scholar of literature that I began to appreciate the social commentary hidden within the pages. I began to augment my own observations with the insights of other students of detective fiction, and I was surprised to discover that my beloved middlebrow books were a source of great debate in academic circles.

Considering the intellectual disdain with which academia typically regards genre fiction, it is surprising that such a wealth of scholarship exists that focuses on it. There are certain genres that elicit more censure than others—particularly romance, young adult, and the subset of detective fiction known as the “cozy” mystery. Much of the criticism of genre fiction seems to be rooted in its popularity: “if a text belonging to genre fiction is too popular, then this very popularity can be a signifier of its lack of cultural authority” (Gillis 17-18). Authors of genre fiction are the targets not only of intellectual condescension, but also are subject to negative critiques that accuse them of upholding plots, characters, and viewpoints that fail to progress with the ever-shifting mores of society. This is especially true concerning feminist themes and

the perceived perpetuation of outmoded gender relationships and gender performance stereotypes.

The cozy rose out of the period between the two world wars, known as the Golden Age. As the name suggests, there are many authors who gained notoriety during that time, but it is Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, and Ngaio Marsh who are most widely recognized as the greatest of the Golden Age authors: “Like other ephemera, much interwar detective fiction is long out of print, but the work of one group of writers, the so-called Queens of Detection—Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, and Dorothy L. Sayers—endures” (Mayhall 772). These women were masters of their genre, and their books continue to be enjoyed today, generations after the world they described has passed into memory.

Detective fiction of the interwar period, on its face, does present a rather staid and outdated set of social mores and assumptions. Authors were—and still are—pilloried and denigrated, being dismissed as unworthy of being considered significant or talented fiction writers. Their books are criticized for not being rooted in real life, presenting fictional worlds that are nothing but idealized little utopias into which the vexing inconvenience of murder has intruded. For example, “[like] her antagonists, Marsh was accused of hiding from her public, using genre fiction to avoid confronting the real problems examined by so-called serious authors” (Allmendinger 74). One attribute of these works that elicits such harsh critiques is that the protagonist in these stories is almost always a member of the aristocracy, frequently an amateur, but consistently a clear product of an excellent education that only privilege can provide. Rather than being considered progressive or forward thinkers, writers like Ngaio Marsh and Dorothy L. Sayers appeared to many critics to instead be proponents of the old class system and social prejudices: “Linking the comforts of wealth and the intellectual attainment of those

atop the hierarchy, Sayers paves the way for the maintenance of the notion of social strata” (McGlynn 72), and it is not difficult to understand what prompts such responses.

Generally well-educated themselves, the female characters in these stories are given the opportunity to detect along with their male counterparts, but they can never claim full authority in the investigation. Agatha Christie’s elderly spinster Miss Marple not only solves the crime, but also must navigate human nature in order to be able to do so. In Christie’s *Nemesis*, in fact, Miss Marple is set on the case by the deceased but wealthy Mr. Rafiel, whom she met in *A Caribbean Mystery*. He is the one who places value upon her natural abilities, and it is he who has the assumed authority to influence and direct the course of her life, no matter how temporarily, from the grave. Christie makes it clear that Miss Marple is a creature of a bygone era, especially in *At Bertram’s Hotel*, where the lady is pleased to find time has stood still. The resolution of the case shatters this time capsule in the end—another indication that perhaps the author is not so wedded to conservative traditions as it might seem at first glance.

Christie is not alone in using a female detective—even if presented as the detective’s assistant. Sayers allowed Harriet Vane to go from innocent suspect in *Strong Poison* to apprentice in *Have His Carcase*, primary investigator in *Gaudy Night*, and equal partner in *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Harriet Vane provides commentary on Sayers’s behalf, allowing Sayers to advance her own view of “woman’s place in society and culture, through her female detective figure. Sayers highlights this emergent culture of subversion and manipulation of this reinstated/dominant culture of the separate spheres and domesticated women *through* Harriet’s detection” (Martin 382). *Gaudy Night* in particular presents the debate of head versus heart, and this theme is one that the book continually revisits. Presented as an intellectual, almost dispassionate, discussion among characters and in Harriet Vane’s private thoughts, Sayers is able

to broach the subject of a woman's role in society and the considerations that influence people's opinions on the shift from nurturing-woman-in-the-home to professional-woman-in-the-workforce. By presenting this issue within the context of Harriet Vane's intellectual and personal attributes, Sayers is able to make a solid argument in favor of women's equality without ever offending anyone's delicate sensibilities.

In Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds*, "Amanda is not just a conveniently pretty appendix for Campion... she is indeed his partner, and her intelligence—in true female gentleman fashion—is described not as the opposite but as an important aspect of her femininity" (Zsámbsa 37). The concept of a female gentleman was developed by Melissa Schaub and is in itself an example of the way in which interwar detective fiction bridged the gap between conservative tradition and progressive change:

Schaub introduces the term "female gentleman" to refer to this character type "depict[ed as] a consistent ideal of female behavior, [which she sees as] a feminist reappropriation of the Victorian ideal of middle-class masculinity. The female gentleman unites old ideas about class with new ideas about gender, in a combination that sheds light on today's feminisms" (21)

From the first moment that we meet Lady Amanda Fitton in *Sweet Danger*, her most defining trait is her determined competence. Allingham does not so much present her as unfeminine as she endows Amanda with the authority that comes with the pragmatism and prudence that are traditionally seen as masculine attributes. Each of the four Queens of Crime employs characters with these attributes, although their presentation is so nuanced as to be only subconsciously recognized by the casual reader.



New Zealand author Ngaio Marsh identified strongly with British culture, and so it is not unusual that her work is congruent with the work of Christie, Allingham, and Sayers, who were all products of an English upbringing. When her character Agatha Troy finds herself embroiled in the murder of the man whose portrait she has just completed in *Final Curtain*, Marsh allows her to partner with aristocratic Scotland Yard detective Roderick Alleyn in working toward a solution. Even if characters such as Troy are not presented as the actual detective, they are nonetheless the detectives' intellectual partners and have a positive impact on the progress of the case. This type of female character allows the reader to perceive these women as intellectual beings rather than creatures of pure emotion. Such a perspective works to directly contradict the traditional view that women are governed by an inherent feminine instinct rather than the masculine knowledge and understanding nature has denied them. It is a significant distinction to make because, "[while] women have historically been characterised by the body and its functions, men have traditionally been associated with the intellect or mind" (English 38). Male and female are not opposing elements in these books; instead, the female sleuth is presented as a harmonizing factor in the story, allowing male and female to work together effectively in a way that either on their own could not. Thus, although the Golden Age authors are still constrained by societal restrictions, they are able to construct female characters who are the intellectual equals of their male counterparts. It would be a mistake to ignore this simply because these authors might fail to completely overthrow the shackles of a misogynistic society.

The debate on the purported social conservatism of Golden Age detective fiction has been notable for the sharp opposition between the pro-genre fiction camp and their anti-genre fiction peers. For every scholar that illustrates how one of these authors has made a progressive or significant observation of contemporary societal issues, another scholar will immediately

counter with the argument that the same text propounds a conservative, hidebound, and unenlightened view of the world. “The women in [Golden Age] texts are burdened by society’s perception of them, forced to choose between artificially polarized professional and personal desires and basic needs, expected to meet incompatible and unrealistic demands” (45). The result for the authors of such fiction is that they must not only navigate the technical demands of their craft, but also assiduously avoid repeating the perceived sins of the writers who have gone before them. However, today’s detective fiction continues to be dismissed for having unrealistic expectations regarding the presentation of social issues, which creates a greater challenge for modern detective fiction writers. They must be certain to champion the most forward-thinking social values while constructing a compelling plot, characters, and narrative language; yet no matter how many additional hurdles these authors face, their resulting work continues to be labeled as “less than” true literary fiction.

As a scholar and a writer of “cozy” detective fiction, I have experienced this intellectual tug-of-war from both sides of the fence. Writers experience enough rejection and criticism in their professional lives as it is; adding in the dismissive attitude toward anything not labeled “literary fiction” makes it difficult to ignore the naysayers long enough to create one’s art. This problem is similar to that experienced by non-representational artists, who are denigrated for failing to produce traditional portraits and landscapes. Wholesale condemnation of these alternative forms of traditional creative work results in a blindness to talent that does not fit into the approved highbrow media that the artistic world compulsively bows to, generation after generation.

To examine and understand the truth of conservatism and progressivism in detective fiction, it is necessary to understand how the most notable works of that type have contributed to

the discussion of contemporary social issues, as well as how those representations are responsive to the experiences of both the individual authors and society overall. But first, what does the label “cozy mystery” signify, and how has the genre evolved to what it is today? Furthermore, how do societal changes impact modern detective fiction writers?

### **Detecting the Social Backstory**

The Golden Age of mystery writing spanned a chaotic period in Britain, an intense time of social change and shifting mores. To conduct a meaningful analysis of the books that were produced during this period, it is necessary to have some understanding of the sociopolitical climate in which they were written. This is contrary to the position some scholars choose to take, but I would posit that those dissenting voices are motivated by other considerations than the aspiration to correctly assess the merits and significance of detective fiction in the literary pantheon. For example, an academic “may suggest that readers of the genre do not need to know the genre’s history, but he does so because it serves the purpose of his argument that crime and detection are so ubiquitous that the genre cannot be easily untangled from other literary histories” (Gillis 12). On the contrary, the close interrelationship of the social and cultural upheaval of the interwar period and detective fiction of the time is deserving of constructive scholarly attention.

In 1925, Benito Mussolini established a fascist dictatorship in Italy, and in the same year Adolf Hitler took control of the Nazi Party in Germany. Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, implementing his fascist policies a year after the British Union of Fascists was established by Oswald Mosley. The late 1920s and early 1930s saw a rapid spread of anti-Semitism and far-right politics across Europe. Inevitably, the shifting political scenes engendered a great deal of

tension, protest, and discontent throughout 1930s, with World War II breaking out in 1939. It also was in the mid- to-late 1930s that British and American crime fiction began, still largely unengaged with international politics, to question its own self-containedness on matters of justice. (Bernthal 32)

These events created social, religious, political, and cultural upheaval that came together to create an audience that was uniquely receptive to the type of detective fiction offered by the Golden Age authors. Exploring this dynamic in its historical context allows us to both better contextualize interwar detective fiction and to understand the current popularity of cozy mysteries in connection with contemporary issues.

As Laura Vorachek points out, “Prejudice against persons of color in England were exacerbated in the first decades of the twentieth century when Great Britain’s colonial Others came ‘home’ in significant numbers” (62). Racism and xenophobia were not the only specters to appear in the days after the first World War, as the traditional class system in England began to break down. The number of young men who did not return from war left a hole in the workforce that could only be filled with men from lower classes and women. So dramatic were the changes during this time that there was a predictable pushback from members of society who were not pleased with the end of the old status quo. It would have been impossible for Golden Age authors to write realistic plots if they ignored these chaotic points of societal friction outright, and yet in order to present their work in a manner palatable to a greater audience, their stances on these issues had to be left unsaid.

However, this does not mean that these writers’ views were not reflected by their plots and characters. “Each author uses the genre to explore changing meanings of class in modern Britain ... and to imagine social worlds in which certain aristocratic values remain essential to

the maintenance of the social order” (Mayhall 775). Indeed, their writing expressed the collective anxiety of a nation attempting to rebuild itself in a world that has irrevocably changed. “Having stared into the abyss of world war, revolution, and regicide, interwar Britons frequently viewed domestic political problems in catastrophic terms, which may explain why repairing rents in the social fabric became a feature of middlebrow fiction in the 1920s and 1930s” (776). Golden Age detective fiction did not deny these stressors, but it did provide a respite from the uncertainty and frictions of the time.

Whether detective fiction writers were consciously aware of how these influences were expressed in their work, it is impossible to deny that detective fiction as a genre—then and now—serves as a sort of social barometer for the world in which the author lives. “In *Talking About Detective Fiction*, P. D. James declares that to read the fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh ‘is to learn more about the England in which they lived and worked than most popular social histories can provide, and in particular about the status of women in the years between the wars’” (Beresford-Sheridan 19). Therefore, having established that this relationship between reality and fiction exists—and even thrives—within the genre of detective fiction, we must examine how this relationship informs mystery writers of the past and today.

Detective fiction is rooted in the works of respected writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sheridan LeFanu, and Edgar Allan Poe. It has been suggested that the genre first emerged “in the mid- to late–nineteenth century, an emergence that was located in the apparently extraordinary creative capacities of Edgar Allan Poe, and his short story cycles featuring Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin” (Gillis 10). However, it is the Golden Age authors who are most readily associated with the overall genre, especially the “group of women writers known as the

Big Four: Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh” (Allmendinger 70). The Detection Club, founded by those authors and still in existence today, established a list of “rules” that governed elements necessary to be considered a true work of detective fiction. “Set up in 1930, with Sayers as a founding member, the club was designed to enable writers to discuss and promote their work. It was also a forum for authors who had begun publishing since the end of the First World War to interact with members of the previous generation” (Stewart 106). One of the principal rules was the idea of fair play; the detective in the story could not solve the mystery using information that was not available to the reader. “The detective must detect using logic, facts must be reasonable, and fair play must be observed, meaning that readers should have a chance of figuring out the solution for themselves” (115). There was some wiggle room available, however; for although “essential information should not be concealed from the reader... the detective may have specialised knowledge that allows for an interpretation of facts that would escape the reader” (*ibid.*). Specialized knowledge becomes more likely when we consider that the sleuths of these mysteries inhabit the upper class of British society, and therefore have the benefit of superior education and intellectual self-assurance. “Almost every element assists the general concept of an intellectual game” (Melikhov 356) rather than emphasizing the violence of murder. The cozy focuses on problem-solving rather than suspense, restricting sex or violence to off-stage action (Ius). This allows the reader to intellectually address the problem without having to confront the messier details.

Another convention established for the detective fiction genre is that the mystery takes place in a small, self-contained community. The country house party is a commonly used setting because it offers a finite number of potential suspects, facilitating the presentation of the mystery as an intellectual exercise that can be solved by the reader as well as the sleuth. House parties are

also a convenient setting because they bring an element of the unusual, the protagonist placed in an environment where the unexpected is more plausible simply because the surroundings are unfamiliar. “The holiday space, then, gives the female detective a stage upon which to perform these breaks from the social and cultural ritual of everyday life; the space enables a performed and fluid feminine identity to be exploited and manipulated for the purpose of detection in the context of a shifting and repurposed milieu” (Martin 383). By constructing these settings, the detective fiction authors are thus able to free their female protagonists from the constraints of traditional gender roles, placing them in a situation in which there are no established expectations for “proper” feminine behavior because it is so unusual. Another such holiday setting is demonstrated by Dorothy Sayers in *Have His Carcase*, in which Harriet Vane goes on a seaside holiday, only to discover a dead body on the beach. “Sayers rewrites the narrative of exploration and the very image of adventuring into the unknown from the female perspective here, and exposes the feeling of freedom and empowerment felt by being a part of the natural landscape” (385). This is a clear example of how Golden Age authors were able to remove female characters from the restrictive society in which they exist, allowing them to demonstrate their intelligence and perspicacity without blatantly offending social norms.

Sayers is also particularly useful for the analysis of intellectual exercise being, as she was, a product of Oxbridge and its lofty scholarly legacy. “Later generations of feminists saw Sayers as not going far enough in her arguments, but Sayers herself was acutely aware of her own privileged position compared to that of other women of her day” (Armstrong 167). *Gaudy Night*, a mystery that focuses on scholar and mystery writer Harriet Vane, Lord Peter Wimsey’s love interest, rather than Lord Peter himself. Lord Peter owns his identity as the erudite and worldly younger brother of a duke, happy to be free of the responsibility of his elder brother’s

position but in no way reluctant to take advantage of his hereditary advantages. In *Busman's Honeymoon*, Sayers allows the reader to fully appreciate the implications of his dedication to Harriet by revealing that he had once “owned” a celebrated soprano (Scowcroft 27)—not because he sees the ownership of another person based upon a sexual relationship as commonplace, but because of his insistence that a marriage to Harriet be one of equals. In presenting this apparent contradiction in attitude, Sayers invites comment and debate on the issue of women and their perceived worth in society.

### **Detecting Social Commentary**

It is logical to question why a genre so firmly rooted in a bygone age that is rife with old-fashioned assumptions and restrictive social norms endures. What is it that makes it possible for modern readers to be just as swept up in these stories as those of the interwar period were? How can we enjoy reading books that have no claim to labels like “classic literature” and appear to endorse backward perspectives on gender roles, racial stereotypes, and class divisions?

It is inarguable that, rather than being considered the voice of progressive ideals, Golden Age writers are often viewed as socially and politically conservative defenders of the status quo—no matter how irretrievably that status quo had passed into memory. Indeed, this criticism can be quite harsh: “As one scholar has concluded: ‘The novel and the detective novel are [...] totally different: the first takes human nature as its basis and its subject, while the second only reluctantly admits human nature because it must. The detective novel would abolish human nature if it could’” (Allmendinger 74). A counter-argument exists that, perhaps despite itself, detective fiction reveals the truth of the times in which it is written, exposing social ills and prejudices simply by recreating the reality of the times: “In *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, Susan Rowland summarizes the critical consensus that, although the Golden Age detective story



‘makes social ideologies visible’ in the conflicts it depicts, its structure culminates in a reassuringly ‘conservative closure’” (Heady 865). There is even a theory that the apparent conservatism of interwar detective fiction is less an adherence to old-fashioned ideals and more a trauma-based denial: “Even as the specter of trauma attempts to return, via the lifeless body of the murder victim, the detective narrative attempts to repress it, to resolve it” (Gildersleeve). What this has revealed is that there is a need to reconcile and define how these disparate theories join together to reveal a deeper insight into the social and cultural signifiers within the text of detective fiction past and present.

Those who defend Golden Age authors—and their present-day counterparts—argue that, rather than espousing conservative ideals of the past, the characters and plots of these stories serve to reveal often unpalatable truths about the world. “Because detective fiction interacts with the world around it, it presents not just a fictional world separate from the material world in which the reader lives but also commentary on the conditions of the world in which that fiction was created” (Hendrickson 58). For example, in Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Unnatural Death*, racism and economics combine, threatening to destroy a black man by convicting him of murder. In the end, he is exonerated, and yet the ultimate resolution is not a wholly satisfactory one, for while “Hallelujah arguably has a stronger claim to Agatha’s fortune than the cousin who is introduced in the final pages of the novel... he is never recognized as a legitimate member of the Dawson family. His outsider status—to the Dawson family and perhaps to Britain—is not questioned” (Vorachek 66). The plot presents the fact of racism without directly challenging its legitimacy, thereby underscoring its saturation in the collective minds of the community. The association between black men and criminal violence is so ingrained that it need not be explained or quantified. The characters’ motivations and perceptions are a direct result of the fear of “sexual

relationships that disrupt a perceived natural order” (63). This point is acknowledged and is, in fact, the murderer’s motivation in framing the black character Hallelujah (“...the false clue she leaves at the crime scene provokes a reaction that demonstrates the English public was quite familiar with the correlation of black men and sexual violence,” (64)), but none of the characters speak out against the fundamental injustice inherent in racial biases. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that this equates to an endorsement of that viewpoint. On the contrary, *Unnatural Death* demonstrates how the frank avowal of social ills can be used to effectively illuminate its fundamental injustice.

This examination through unapologetic acknowledgment is typical of the genre overall. Detective fiction authors cannot help but incorporate contemporary mores into their stories if they are attempting to produce believable plots and characters. The most adept authors will consciously grapple with hot-button issues now as the Golden Age authors did, bringing them to life and exploring how they impact people and communities in times of stress and turmoil without directly addressing them. By making more controversial attributes a part of a character or plot, the writer makes those attributes less incendiary in a way that more direct discussion cannot; “running dialogues and critiques surrounding society and gender perceptions are adroitly interwoven throughout the main story line of murder and mystery” (Beresford-Sheridan 26). Detective fiction presents a universally acknowledged crime, and so the characters and conditions surrounding a murder investigation are immediately open for analysis and understanding since that is what is necessary to bring about justice. Murder is, after all, is as much as an offence to humanity as racism, sexism, or any other label that can be applied to a circumstance in which a person is robbed of their right to exist as a human being. It is perhaps ironic that it is only in detective fiction that a person’s right to exist as a human being is not open

for debate, for in the search for justice, the victims achieve an equality in law that they would otherwise be denied by certain portions of the society in which they lived.

What has earned the detective fiction genre the label of “cozy” is the emphasis placed on the intellectual challenge presented by the mystery rather than the violence and gore of the initial crime committed. “Crime narratives function around questions—of motive, of investigation, of interpretation, of narrative coherence, and so on” (Green 46). This focus explains in part why the genre has inspired debate surrounding its treatment of contemporary social issues and change. It is necessary to understand the parameters of the genre before a true examination of the social commentary incorporated into these texts can take place.

### **Detecting Feminist Classism**

The way in which classes are presented in Golden Age texts reveals a good deal about the authors’ attitudes and perceptions of the unspoken class hierarchy. “Allingham, Marsh, and Sayers all grapple with the remnants of traditional aristocratic identity through the figure of the gentleman sleuth” (Mayhall 777). Dorothy L. Sayers has been particularly maligned for what is seen as her latent class prejudice. It is true that the Golden Age authors tended to feature upper-class sleuths of both genders in their works, and it is reasonable to wonder what each is trying to communicate about the British class system. Do these writers lift up their female characters at the cost of abandoning the lower classes to their fate?

In *Gaudy Night*, there are numerous examples of dialogue between different social classes, making clear the “social judgments” (Curzan and Adams 370) implied about the speakers. Style shifting when addressing a person of higher social status is typical of the expectation placed on the working class; to find gainful employment, they must be capable of “a high level of politeness and formality in interpersonal interactions [and this] requires them to be

proficient in a language register” other than their own (Mac Ruairc 551). Lower class speakers recognize someone from the same speech community from their similar phonological differences in dialect and use conversational implicature, which assumes a shared class belief system, to reveal their agreeing viewpoints on women: “‘That’s right,’ said the foreman. ‘Keep the girls at ‘ome. Funny kind o’ job you got ‘ere, mate. Wot was you, afore you took to keepin’ a ‘en ‘ouse?’” (Sayers 132-133) The information the foreman’s speech gives to the reader has not been obscured by the passage of time; even today, the socioeconomic cue is easily read and understood.

The character of Annie Wilson—once a member of the middle class but reduced to life as a servant—demonstrates these subtle social cues as well. While she is concerned with keeping her employment, Annie maintains a formal register and is careful to be polite and inoffensive, although giving an unsolicited opinion shows a certain lack of respect for social class distinctions: “‘But it seems a great shame to keep up this big place just for women to study books in. I can’t see what girls want with books. Books won’t teach them to be good wives’” (135). She may speak more correctly, but she does not hesitate to switch to an informal register and negative face when she is confronted and accused: “‘It would do you good to learn to scrub floors for a living as I’ve done, and use your hands for something, and say ‘madam’ to a lot of scum’” (512). Her exposition follows prescriptive grammar rules more closely than lower class speech, while at the same time maintaining an informal register despite its inappropriateness when addressing social superiors. When she is challenged by the women of academia, she continues to speak in a manner that shows a decent degree of education, but also with a crassness of sentiment that marks her as a social inferior to the scholarly women dons of the college: “‘I wish I could burn down this place and all the places like it—where you teach women to take

men's jobs and rob them first and kill them afterwards'" (511). As a representative of the middle class, she does not have the same pronunciation indicators of her lower-class counterpart, but the violence and ignorance inherent in her speech communicates to the reader that she is not one of the elite—whether economic or academic.

By way of contrast, when the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey arrogantly advises his nephew Lord Saint-George against professional women, his speech clearly reflects his covert prestige and the assumed authority of age: "'Bear in mind that the amateur professional is peculiarly rapacious. This applies both to women and to people who play cards'" (209). Although Lord Saint-George, revealing his relative youth through his variationist speech, describes the female students as "grubby," he doesn't give any indication that he objects to their studies (232). Meanwhile, expectation that conversational implicature about male scholar's opinion of women's degrees will be understood serves as an acknowledgment that both speaker and hearer are from the same speech community of female scholars.

The upper-class speech patterns of the interwar period that Sayers presents phonetically are the one area in which modern audiences might not immediately recognize the patois of the privileged. Readers today are not as aware of the classism inherent in what is considered "proper" speech. However, people of the interwar period would have been more familiar with how "pronunciations [had] altered to adhere more closely to how words look on a page, with the newly literate, emergent middle class emphatic about pronunciation 'rules'" (McGlynn 74). The indolent carelessness of aristocratic speech seen in Lord Peter Wimsey and his family is effective in communicating the privilege inherent in members of the ruling class. "Sayers consistently relates Peter's speech with a 'dropped g' and other orthographic cues associated with the upper-

class accent of the day” (73). He need not be mindful of his pronunciation because he does not depend upon speech to establish himself as socially superior.

These distinctions are no less powerful when applied to the female characters. Indeed, the differences in speech tell the reader a great deal about a character and where she fits not only in the story, but also in the broader social hierarchy. “Each author uses the genre to explore changing meanings of class in modern Britain... and to imagine social worlds in which certain aristocratic values remain essential to the maintenance of the social order” (Mayhall 775). Assumptions are made, often unconsciously, based solely upon how the character speaks, but Golden Age authors should not be condemned as classist. It is by defining and illuminating the British class system that these writers invite examination and questioning of an inherently unjust socioeconomic system.

### **Detecting Female Voices**

I did not set out to be a writer of detective fiction originally. Instead, I authored two romance novellas and one historical romance novel that were published by an independent publisher. My first foray into mystery writing occurred when I contributed stories to *The Darwin Murders*, *Tasteful Murders*, and *Loving You to Death* murder anthologies. I also examined the art of writing itself, maintaining a blog for several years and writing guest pieces for other writers’ blogs. I was trained from childhood to be a storyteller by the shenanigans of my extended family, which have given me tremendous raw material to work with and share. For example, while we were trudging around cemeteries in Kansas, I overheard a notable comment from my mother’s cousin. “He got up from the dinner table to go to the bathroom, and he showed up a week later in Mexico.” I don’t know who she was talking about, but the flood of potential explanations nearly

overwhelmed me. These stories all need homes, and genre fiction—particularly detective fiction—provides the means to create that.

When I plan my characters and plots, I try to break as many habits of the genre as I can without separating from the elements that are necessary to lay claim to that genre. For example, in my historical romance, the relationship of the principal couple was the focal point of the story, but I elected to write in third person limited from the point of view of the male protagonist rather than the female. It is all too easy to slip into the patterns of character dynamics used by the Golden Age writers, particularly since there is such a strong conscious legacy between the books of the interwar period and today's cozies.

This type of pitfall is why I find it important in my writing to seek out ways to eliminate stereotypes and the tropes that minimize or invalidate women. I look for plot twists and characters that can show a true partnership between the sexes rather than one gender being in the power position. Also, beyond dealing with the “whodunit” question, I hope to address the facets and flaws of human nature, exploring how different characters within a story can each provide a different viewpoint on the central theme, which then ties into the solution of the mystery. Following the example of the Golden Age crime writers, my plots and characters evolve from “a determined ‘what if?’, and that ‘what if ‘ is the reality at which these texts aim: the reality of a writership and a readership together ‘talking around’ the nature of a form, the nature of humanity, the nature of story-telling, the nature of discovery, the nature of coincidence, and the nature of connection” (Green 49). This means working both to eliminate the specter of masculine entitlement and to capture the powerful emotion behind the central character relationships.

For all that, the old formula of the Detection Club still holds sway over detective fiction, including my own. The small, closed community; fair play; and lack of explicit violence or sex are parameters that I apply to my own writing, as do the many other present-day writers of the genre.

Like colonies, nations, dominions, and empires, formula fiction is defined by boundaries or rules which limit what practitioners of a certain genre may write.

Borders are especially important in the British mystery genre, which often feature murders that take place in enclosed places—the locked room mystery being the most famous example of this type of plot. (Allmendinger 83)

House parties have disappeared, and technological advances have eliminated much of the sense of isolation that a location can provide without extenuating circumstances. Anyone in a locked room can easily communicate with another person a world away, and drones can access places that would otherwise be impossible to navigate. Out of necessity, the old conventions have made way for modern equivalents. Professional conventions, coffee shops, anemic seminars, and corporate offices are now the closed communities in which mysteries are contained. Internet searches have taken the place of surreptitious hunts through desk drawers. Indelicate subjects like sex are not glossed over so as not to cause offence, but instead are revealed through teasing and sarcastic comments. “Thus the fragmented, inexplicable and even unattributable corpses of war are replaced by the whole, over-explained, completely known bodies of detection” (Gildersleeve). Today’s detective fiction is as much a reflection of our times as Golden Age books revealed the truths of British interwar society. It not only commemorates our unique moment in history, but also the breadth of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes to be found within different socioeconomic groups within our society.



After all, the “focus on the personal is also part of what Sayers recognizes as unique to British detective fiction” (Gillis 16). I enjoy contributing my own observations and perspective to the chorus of female voices in my time.

While we have come a long way from *Gaudy Night*, which features Harriet Vane as the primary investigator but still relies on Lord Peter Wimsey to supply the solution, I feel there is still a distance to go in separating these plots from the damsel in distress archetype.

The female detective also has her roots in the Victorian era through such creations as Collins’s Marian Halcombe (*The Woman in White*) and Magdalen Vanstone (*No Name*), as well as in the anachronistic female detectives of Andrew Forrester (*The Female Detective*) and William S. Hayward (*Revelations of a Lady Detective*). These early detective figures—a combination of professionals and amateurs, upper class and lower class, males and females—demonstrate that, from its genesis, detective fiction was founded upon experiment and intertextual dialogue. (Green 43)

Modern mystery writers are compelled to acknowledge the subtle way in which the portrayal of female characters speaks to women’s role in society and even their sexual relationships and gender identity. Whether the action takes place in the present day or a bygone era, there is an expectation that these female characters will embrace today’s progressive ideals. Rather than being an assistant or even a partner of a male detective, the female character now takes the lead, often with the man playing a supporting role.

### **Detecting Modern Detective Fiction**

P.D. James’s work provides the clearest modern representation of the Golden Age’s legacy, presenting the reader with numerous parallels to the best-known works from that period.

One such parallel is the description of Adam Dalgleish's first meeting with the woman he would fall in love with.

Hearing his footsteps, she turned towards him and as he reached his door their eyes met and for a second held as if in mutual amazement. The light fell on a face of grave and astounding beauty, and he experienced an emotion that now came rarely, a physical jolt of astonishment and affirmation. (James 120)

This echoes the moment in Ngaio Marsh's *Artists in Crime* when Roderick Alleyn first encounters Agatha Troy, his future wife.

She turned quickly before he had time to look away and their gaze met.

Alleyn was immediately conscious of a clarification of his emotions. As she stood before him, her face slowly reddening under his gaze, she seemed oddly familiar. He felt that he already knew her next movement, and the next inflexion of her clear, rather cold voice. It was a little as though he had thought of her a great deal, but never met her before. These impressions held him transfixed, for how long he never knew, while he still kept his eyes on hers. Then something clicked in his mind, and he realized that he had stared her out of countenance. The blush had mounted painfully to the roots of her hair and she had turned away.

"I'm sorry," said Alleyn steadily. "I'm afraid I was looking at the green smudge on your cheek." (Marsh 7)

When one compares these two passages alone, Marsh's influence on James's writing becomes undeniable.

One of the most significant differences between Golden Age detective fiction and the modern cozy is the predominant gender of the sleuth/protagonist. Whereas most Golden Age

detectives were male—or female with a clear source of male support and supervision—today’s mysteries typically feature a female protagonist who is the principal investigator in the story. While male associates and partners are still present, it is the female character who is able to untangle the clues and perceive the truth. Some authors go further by providing the female investigator with one or a group of women to assist her rather than any male character serving in that role.

Despite this clear shift, it would be a mistake to entirely ignore the part in solving the mystery that many central female characters played in Golden Age fiction. “By fashioning these women as active detectives, Sayers again makes a political and societal statement about traditional gender roles” (Beresford-Sheridan 22). However, it cannot be denied that today’s authors have built on this foundation significantly. Casey Daniels is an example of a currently active cozy author who writes under multiple pseudonyms. She is quite active in the writing community, and I have had the opportunity to workshop with her in the past. The humor and tension of her Pepper Martin series is inflated by Pepper’s personality, which can be shallow and self-centered unless she is pushed by her dead associates to shift her priorities. In books such as *Agnes and the Hitman*, Jennifer Crusie proves that even the quirkiest sense of humor can be given voice in a mystery—anyone who can create a protagonist from a woman with a record for assault and battery with an iron skillet understands how to employ comedy where one might not expect to find it. This inclusion of humorous character traits is in keeping with the Golden Age legacy, after all; it makes the characters more three-dimensional and real. “Because of their shortcomings and human features... they gradually become something like old friends of the readers of the series, people get used to their imperfections because of the humour” (Melikhov 359). A more well-known name, even outside of cozy mystery circles, is Janet Evanovich.

Originally writing strictly romance novels, she began writing cozy mysteries with her protagonist, Stephanie Plum, an unlikely bounty hunter, and her compatriots.

### **Detecting the Cozy's Staying Power**

Even if we do not conclude that interwar detective fiction does not deserve to be condemned for overly conservative or backward viewpoints, it is nonetheless undeniable that the world inhabited by Christie, Sayers, Allingham, and Marsh has passed into memory. A century has passed since the Golden Age began, and yet the popularity of these authors continues to such a degree that scores of present-day writers strive to capture their style, often eschewing a modern setting by centering their stories in the 1920s and 30s. Why do we continue to be fascinated by these tales of a vanished world, and what compels us to strive to recreate the magic that makes those Golden Age voices speak to us so clearly?

While it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the prevailing social dilemmas of modern society, some acknowledgment of hot-button issues is necessary to draw a comparison between the interwar period and today. “Described by Alison Light as a ‘literature of convalescence’, [detective] fiction was, in its artfully distanced way, a space of grief, mourning and repair: a reassuring locus within which losses could be resolved and the social fabric restored” (Plain 181). Although women’s rights and status have unquestionably been improved overall, inequities and injustices are still perpetrated in the name of gender superiority. The incendiary debate on abortion rights and the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* are clear indicators that a woman continues to have only a qualified right to control what happens to her own body. Modern politics are fraught by a struggle between democracy and fascism, much as they were leading up to the second World War. Xenophobia is again on the rise, with border walls and arguments over immigration at the

center of political debate. The COVID-19 pandemic even provides a parallel, echoing the merciless trail of death that the flu pandemic of 1918 left in its wake. If, as this paper argues, the popularity of “cozy” detective fiction is in part due to its acknowledgement of these struggles while providing an ordered escape that brings sanity back to readers’ lives, it is understandable why the genre is so popular now.

The Golden Age authors saw the rise of Hitler and Nazism, just as today’s writers are witnessing the rise of Trump and the MAGA movement. As described by Michele Goodwin, “the function of women's erasure serves to preserve social norms, positions of power, and sex-based hierarchies” (857). Goodwin goes on to state:

First, women are rendered invisible as contributors to the advancement of society through law, medicine, science, and other fields to stunning effect. We could term this *professional invisibility*. Second, women's contributions to caregiving, broadly defined in essential care service is also muted, rendered invisible and devalued. COVID- 19 brings this observation and deadly reality into stark relief. This Article describes this type of undervalued labor as *essential service invisibility*. Third and problematically, women as primary care providers in the domestic context are expected to assume such uncompensated roles. Thus, while in plain sight, *domestic invisibility* nonetheless harms women by foisting domestic service and the expectation of home-bound service upon them... (*ibid.*)

As Goodwin’s analysis shows, issues surrounding women’s status in society are just as multilayered and complex as they were during the Golden Age. However, an in-depth

examination of those issues as they manifest outside the context of detective fiction is beyond the scope of this paper.

Both the interwar and modern eras also share an underlying progressivism revealed by significant changes in societal attitudes. For instance, the Golden Age authors saw women gain the right to vote and slowly begin to break into the professions. “While the newer, civic universities were admitting and awarding degrees to women by the turn of the century... Oxford and Cambridge were famously slow to participate in this cultural shift, resisting change until 1920 and 1948 respectively” (English 25). Despite such advances, there was great resistance to changes in women’s roles, and any permanent shift or continued progress were by no means assured. “Although Sayers’ competent, independent, and university-educated women are honest and self-respecting, in *Strong Poison*, Harriet is presented by the authorities as dangerous both to men and to the social order” (Zsámiba 26). The somewhat bland presentation of this situation in Golden Age mysteries is often interpreted as an indifference to feminism and gender roles in society. However, as a reader, I have felt that it is instead an honest realism that reveals the true injustice of social prejudices simply by illustrating what it looks like from the outside.

Today we see an increasing push for acceptance, not only of women, but also of those who do not fit into traditional gender norms. The general public has become aware, for possibly the first time, of the wide spectrum of sexuality and gender that exists across humanity, and while many refuse to accept this as a natural and fundamental fact of nature, the very fact that we are discussing it at all is significant. Similarly, mental illness, which in my youth was a completely taboo subject, is now openly acknowledged and given legitimacy by a growing percentage of the population.

It could be argued that both the interwar period and the present day are both moments in history marked by severe growing pains as society attempts to adjust to the pressures of changing social norms and prevailing attitudes to issues such as race, religion, and gender. “Having stared into the abyss of world war, revolution, and regicide, interwar Britons frequently viewed domestic political problems in catastrophic terms, which may explain why repairing rents in the social fabric became a feature of middlebrow fiction in the 1920s and 1930s” (Mayhall 776). Indeed, the motives behind the crimes of today’s detective fiction are often rooted in present-day socioreligious controversies. Mystery writer Madelyn Alt’s *Bewitching Mysteries*, for example, present plots that revolve around pagan and non-mainstream religious practices. From the murder of an Amish man that is solved with the help of sigils he left behind to protect his family to the persecution of a practicing witch who is “outed” by the protagonist’s shallow and gossipy sister, the reader is shown different perspectives on faith and belief in a way that does not challenge traditional views openly. Crucially, to understand the story, the audience must understand the true emotion and belief that others feel, and they must go a step further and accept differing faiths as moral, just, and positive viewpoints. Writers’ choices when constructing plots and characters is often strongly influenced by the consideration of these topics, but the detective fiction genre offers a unique opportunity to address contentious social issues in a way that is more palatable and easily accepted than an open debate, or even a bald statement of opinion, would be. We see these characters as good because we are privy to their actions, motivations, relationships, and feelings—and when they become real to us, we are able to embrace their right to exist within a cultural or moral framework that might otherwise appear to be in conflict with our own.

When I sit down to craft a mystery novel, I consciously work to break away from traditional dynamics between the sexes. Where a female sleuth such as Harriet Vane would once have had to resort to the support and insight of her male counterpart, I look for a way for her to lead the way. If there is a fight or struggle, rather than conveniently insert a big, strong, male character to take the blows, I mercilessly force my female protagonist to fight her own battles—albeit often using her brain to overcome brawn. And I am not alone in this; Jennifer Crusie's *Agnes and the Hitman* features a female protagonist who partners with a government hitman to solve a mystery, and along the way, she brains an attacker with a skillet and threatens her ex-fiancé with a roasting fork. The burly hitman is willing to offer her protection, but she consistently handles the situation before he can rush in to save her. This is a far cry from Sayers's *Gaudy Night*, in which the intelligent and resourceful Harriet Vane consents to wearing a thick leather dog collar presented to her by Lord Peter Wimsey as a means of protection in his absence. Not only does she wear it, but it also saves her life when she is attacked.

Social issues and the schisms that they cause within communities also make excellent motives. “Transgression, that is the crossing of social, moral, and legal boundaries, is at the heart of detective fiction” (English 30). After the insurrection on January 6<sup>th</sup>, there are no places left that are too hallowed to be defiled by violence. A world without sanctuaries offers up many potential threats, all of which are fodder for a mystery writer's pen. Barbara Michaels and Madelyn Alt wrote brilliantly of modern-day witches persecuted by their towns. P.D. James unapologetically murdered an archdeacon within the sanctified walls of a church. Kylie Logan created a lovely little button shop and then carelessly left a murder victim at its door. And there are more bodies than apples falling in Sheila Connolly's orchard mysteries.



Settings have also expanded from the traditional small English village or the upper-class house party. From Sarah Atwell's glassblowing mysteries to Juliet Blackwell's haunted home renovation mysteries, no nook or cranny has been left unexplored by the imagination of modern detective fiction writers. Female sleuths are just as varied as the settings in which they trip over bodies. A female plumber valiantly solves mysteries while fixing pipes in Christy Evans's Georgiana Neverall books. Tonya Kappes offers up a series of mail carrier mysteries, and Alice Kimberly pairs up a widowed bookstore owner with the ghost of a hardboiled private investigator. Katie Carlyle's erstwhile San Francisco bookbinder finds mysteries in museums, medieval Scottish churches, and her own apartment. Nowhere and no one is safe from being pulled into solving a murder when detective fiction authors are hunting for a gripping story.

However, these everyday familiar settings and characters continue to create that same sense of order that Golden Age fiction offered to those living in the interwar period. "Both *Coroner's Pidgin* [Allingham] and *The Hollow* [Christie]... are novels that involve bringing chaos to order and due process through the staging of events" (Plain 184). Rather than standing as helpless victims of fate, "the woman as a piece in the recollection of Englishness stands against the present turmoil of history, just as much as does the English landscape as an image of the pastoral idyll" (Zsámbsa 39). In a world of uncertainty and social upheaval, cozy detective fiction offers a reassuring story in which critical thinking is prized above dramatic furor and no matter how egregious the crime, true justice will be served. When the news of the day overwhelms and frightens me, there is nothing I enjoy more than to retreat to one of these ordered worlds for a break from the constant friction and chaos that real life brings.

## Detecting a Conclusion

Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, and Dorothy L. Sayers may not have created plots and characters that are in line with present day ideals, but it is a mistake to overlook their quiet social commentary. What these books show modern writers is that by constructing worlds in which problematic realities and flawed human nature without apology, it is possible to highlight injustices and inequities inherent in our current social system. As a reader of detective fiction, I am given the opportunity to enjoy the intellectual exercise of the mystery itself while learning about the flaws and imperfections of the past and present. As a cozy mystery writer, I am able to push against cultural limitations and explore contemporary social issues in perhaps the most palatable manner possible. “The growing demand for the genre in those interwar years attests to its ability to speak, to connect” (Hendrickson 54), and that continues to be the case today. Whereas an activist or politician speaking on these issues would inevitably offend someone, the mystery writer can present the realities of our time and condition without condemnation or confrontation. Scholars who choose to denigrate genre fiction for not being suitably highbrow and significant do a great disservice to these authors and their work.

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