

“Reader, I murdered him!” Women as writers and readers of crime fiction.

It is a fact universally acknowledged by book sellers that crime does pay in the book world (Blundell, 2011). Although non-fiction sales far exceed those of fiction writing, boosted by educational titles, tourism and television shows, of the fiction categories, the sales of crime novels exceed those of romance, science fiction and literary works. Women, especially of baby boomer age, make up the bulk of buyers. (Bowker.com) By ‘crime fiction’ this paper will employ the definition from the Encyclopaedia Britannica;

”The detective story thrills the reader with mysterious crimes, usually of a violent nature, and puzzles his reason until their motivation and their perpetrator are, through some triumph of logic, uncovered. The detective story and mystery are in fact synonymous” (‘Crime fiction’ - search).

In New Zealand crime fiction sales comprise 30% of the fiction sales, (Nielsen Book Scan, 2010) a sizeable segment of the pie graph, especially in contrast to the historical preferences female readers have held for the “Reader I married him” fiction of the last two hundred years. Romance remains a constantly popular genre, and has accommodated such recent variants as “Reader, I married him even though he is a vampire” or the nonfiction version, “Reader, I married him even though he was a Melbourne mafia leader.” But are all such discussions purely sales driven, today? Why might perfectly respectable people, often medically or legally trained, wish to write crime? Or people from all professions and trades choose to read it?

“The interest in the thriller is the ethical and eristic [sic] conflict between good and evil, between Us and Them. The interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one. The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt.” (Auden, 1948)

Considering the unpleasant nature of the content and behaviours in the genre, this paper will attempt to reflect on the ethical nature of crime fiction from the point of view of both writer and readers, especially educated, professional women; using reference to interviews, blogs and books about and by the writers, as well as responses from a series of focus groups with book club members in New Zealand. The work of Ngaio Marsh, New Zealand’s best known

writer of “teckery” as she called it will be called as witness or case study in defence of crime fiction as ethical writing, driven by moral imperatives for writer and in many cases, the reader.

In a recent interview broadcast on New Zealand’s National Radio, the author Tess Gerritsen recounted how she began as a romance writer and moved on to write eight medical thrillers with romantic plots. Then “[A] reader stood up at a book tour and said ‘I want you to write about serial killers and twisted sex’. So I went home and thought about how the average female reader had asked me to write on ‘serial killers and twisted sex’ and thought about what bothers me, what frightens me” (Radio NZ). On a book tour promoting her eighteenth crime novel featuring the character Jane Rizzoli (whom she planned to kill off in an earlier novel but who she liked too much to do away with) Gerritsen reflects on why women might enjoy reading crime novels. As well as her admission of the financial imperative, to be sold to readers, she suggests a more primal instinct as driving book sales;

“It’s the Why and the Who; Who these people are! What moves them!... It’s also the fear of the unknown; we want to be frightened by them.” She goes on to note how at her local aquarium she sees the bulk of children clustered around the shark tank. There is a desire to recognise threats, to learn to survive and be aware of the enemy. She adds that she believes readers want to identify with the victims (Gerritsen, Radio NZ).

This last idea is certainly worth considering, given the recent popularity of books such as “The Lovely Bones” (Sebald, 2001) and “Afterwards”, by Rosamund Lupton (2011) in which the narrative voice is that of a victim of crime, which we could paraphrase, “Reader I was murdered by him.”

Another contemporary crime writer, Elizabeth George, begins her book on writing, “As a teacher of writing for a number of years, I believe in the mastery of *craft*...The *art* of writing is what you get to once you become familiar with the craft” (2005 p.2). She would appear to agree with Gerritsen about readers’ motives being to do with “Who?” as her first chapter stresses the importance of characters, and soon after, of characters in conflict. “Once we have begun reading a novel we continue it largely because we care about the characters” (ibid, p.9). Her book goes on to deal with other aspects of the craft; setting, plot, voice and process, but returns to explore ways to make characters appeal to or be made memorable to readers.

By carefully selecting their names, their attitudes, and above all their style or voice in dialogue, a writer also conveys both narrative and thematic signals to the reader. (ibid, p.122)

Interestingly one of the few crime writers to write successfully from the perspective of the murderer is Agatha Christie, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) which she set in an English country house, with a patriarch murdered in his study and a small circle of suspects. In this genre unexpected twists are to be expected, however in a brilliant twist, Christie reveals that the murderer is the narrator, thereby “usurping the authority of the narrator” (Munt, p.8).

Christie was one of the four great female crime writers from the Golden Age of detective novels, 1920-1940, writing in a genre which, having been explored by Poe, Collins and, to an extent, Dickens in the nineteenth century, quickly became popular after Conan Doyle created his great character Sherlock Holmes. The other three celebrated women writing with Christie in the period between two world wars were Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh (Drayton, p 20-23). All four created male investigators, each solving crime in a series of books: Christie’s Poirot, Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey, Allingham’s Campion and Marsh’s Chief Detective Inspector Alleyn. Christie was to add one more great invention in *Murder at the Vicarage*, in 1930, introducing the elderly, wise, curious and ostensibly insignificant Miss Marple as her sleuth. Ngaio Marsh’s (1895-1982) work will be discussed later; however it is valuable first to put down some of the key elements of classic crime writing from this period and consider further aspects of its appeal.

In 1948, in an essay printed in Harper’s magazine titled *The Guilty Vicarage: Notes On The Detective Story*, By An Addict, W.H. Auden argued that the sleuth should investigate a murder committed within a closed and closely related community, so that all the characters were suspects. Auden recommended the use of maps and timetables, and he favoured a prosperous setting. "The country is preferable to the town," he wrote, "a well-to-do neighbourhood (but not too well-to-do or there will be a suspicion of ill-gotten gains) better than a slum. The corpse must shock not only because it is a corpse but also because, even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place, as when a dog makes a mess on a drawing room carpet” (Harper’s, (archive) 1948). By this time four strands of detective fiction prevailed: the manor mystery, which reflected the class system and made much of manners; the cosy or cozy mystery, usually set in a picturesque village with little detail of actual unpleasantness or

violence; the locked room mystery in which a finite number of people are confined for a finite time while one of them manages to murder at least one other; and the “hard boiled” mystery which explores nastier people and reveals nastier actions than the other styles. (Drayton, p.24) The “Queens of Crime” preferred the first three styles although to many modern explicit tastes they seem dated and fusty.

In the same year that Auden’s essay was published, the first game of *Cluedo* was sold in Britain. The game was invented as a variation of “Murder” or “Murder in the dark!” a new game to play while waiting out air raid drills in underground bunkers. In 1944, Anthony E. Pratt, an English solicitor's clerk, filed for a patent of his invention, the title referring to the search for clues, and also as a play on the word *Ludo* - Latin for 'I play' (Summerscale, 2008),.

“The players, who are both suspects and sleuths, must discover the truth about the crime by a process of elimination, moving from ballroom to billiard room to library, and methodically crossing off the possibilities on small printed charts.” (Summerscale, 2008)

Although it was invented in the early twentieth century, television was not commercialised or domesticated in the United Kingdom or United States until after 1940. Card games, like *Happy Families*, made popular in Victorian times (Welsh, 1997) gave a range of stock characters straight out of a cosy English village, to be collected in families of four. Jig-saw puzzles, which also arose in popularity from being map-based, in the eighteenth century, to image-based by the early twentieth century, (Williams, 1990), entertained with a puzzle in a formula or pattern with parts to be pieced together to reveal a picture.

These early forms of interactive gaming and role-playing invite players to participate in the picture or story in the same way that mystery novels invite the speculation and problem solving skills of the reader. Board games, card games and puzzles continue to be considered uplifting, beneficial pastimes and for many readers the chief enjoyment of crime fiction is in problem solving. “To surprise the reader when the identity of the murderer is revealed, yet at the same time to convince him that everything he has previously been told about the murderer is consistent with his being a murderer, is the test of a good detective story” (Auden 1948).

As well as riddle and puzzle solving, crime detection offers reassurance in the formula of cause, effect, red herring, revelation, all of which make it so entertaining. Arising as they do

out of a time of social and political upheaval, these novels offer embittered or disappointed readers opportunities to let justice prevail, to support the class system, while proffering the benefits of the newly emerging middle class figures of authority; the lawyers and constabulary. In this they are evidence and agents of social change.

“Do you read detective novels? “Chief Detective Inspector Alleyn asks his doughty off-sider, Detective Inspector Fox, in *Surfeit of Lampreys* Ngaio Marsh’s fourth book.

“No”, said Fox... “It’s not for the want of trying...Something happening on every page to make you think different from what you thought the one before, and the [police] routine got over in the gaps between the chapters.” (p. 265).

Ngaio Marsh has been credited with creating the first professional police detective, in Roderick Alleyn, whose first appearance was in *A man lay dead* in 1934. Her peers had created dilettante sleuths, excellent amateurs, aristocrats, or outsiders through gender or migration. In Alleyn we meet someone inside the system, not a buffoon or laughing policeman of the music hall; with a touch of whimsy and class and a tertiary education. We also meet a tenaciously moral and virtuous man.

The period between world wars was a time of economic expansion and change. To this unsettling world the Queens of Crime gave an element of satisfaction: evil was always found out, the ending would always be the same. Deviants were dealt to with justice and rectitude while giving not too much detail about their particular perverted proclivities. At the same time the women were themselves exemplars of change, in living professional lives, each earning a living as writer while writing about matters which were not deemed feminine or nice. Their writing successes occurred in a “time of change and modernisation for women’s roles, providing women with greater work and leisure opportunities” (Munt, 1994 p. 12). In fact they were able to usurp the masculinity of the genre with generally foppish, aristocratic detectives and, in the case of Agatha Christie’s Poirot, a caricature of a man; “Hercule – a shortened Hercules, and a *poirot*, a clown”. (ibid, p 8) It was not until the post-feminist 1970’s that the “monstrous regiment” (Knox, 1558) of female detectives, bounty hunters, private eyes, and pathologists appeared to complete the feminisation of the genre that mild Miss Marple had begun in 1930. However the formulaic and conservative nature of detective fiction validates a clearly structured society. With feminists writing crime fiction, “Either

feminism or the formula is at risk” (Walton, Jones, 1999, p.59). In the case of Ngaio Marsh’s novels, Roderick Alleyn acquired a wife; an independent, liberal-leaning, “blue-stocking” painter called Agatha Troy whose voice and opinions are made increasingly evident as the series develops and who became an “Artist in Crime” (Marsh, 1938). Troy provides not only a domestic and romantic life for Alleyn, she is his intellectual match; at times, a sounding board, at others a severe critic of the British judiciary. Alleyn is the only married detective of the creations of the Queens of Crime.

One further theory about the rise of crime novels from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century is that they coincided with the rise of religious enthusiasm, as well as a time of paranormal interests (Rowland, 2007). It was a time of searching for meaning and answers and a time of heightened moral conscience. In two of her novels “Death in Ecstasy” and “Spinsters in Jeopardy” Marsh dealt with religious and occult shams, having her hero “tec” call them “Damn, sickly, bogus, mumbo, jumbo”(*Death in Ecstasy*, p.198) .

“Ngaio was the only agnostic Queen of crime. Agatha Christie slept all her life with a crucifix by her bed; Dorothy Sayers was a theologian and devout Christian; and Margery Allingham became an avid follower of Christianity in her later years....For [them] writing about murder was not a betrayal but an affirmation, the Christian theme of sin and expiation being played over and over again” (Drayton, p, 67).

Despite her agnosticism, Marsh had strong beliefs in the role of culture in society, including Maori culture. Using Alleyn’s outsider position to investigate Makutu or spells she has him instructed in Marae (meeting house) procedure and the spirit world by a tribal elder in *Colour Scheme*. (1947) Having first trained at Canterbury College School of Art, as a painter in 1913, she maintained strong ties with the artistic and theatrical community of Christchurch all her life. She had also developed an early talent for writing and acting plays, and was encouraged in this by her parents and their friends, all keen on amateur dramatics. When she was invited to join a repertory company travelling through the North Island of New Zealand as an actress, her life changed. By 1928 when she made her first visit to England, to visit flamboyant upper class friends she had made in New Zealand (whom she fictionalised as the Lampreys) much of the material for her future writing was well established; country houses, the theatre, the art world, especially painting, and travel. (N.W. , NZ Book Council). The passion which was to dominate her life, and for which her writing provided the financial

support, was that of directing plays and developing a professional theatre for Christchurch. From 1913 until her last production in 1975, she directed, and in some instances wrote, or adapted at least forty-eight plays. Of those, twenty five were by Shakespeare, and of these, only two were comedies; *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Twelfth Night* (although at least two productions of each) (Drayton, p.294, 5). In New Zealand she was most renowned for her theatre work in high culture, while being admitted into the pantheon of crime writing abroad. Yet there is a strong moral cross-over between directing *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by day and writing crime by night. Hers was a moral world view despite its secularity and in these plays she regularly encountered essentially evil characters and corrupt behaviours.

This leads to further consideration of the relationship between crime fiction and ethics; the concept of “cultural citizenship” (Hermes, 2007). Having mentioned the idea of social structures being endorsed by crime fiction, we can now ask whether readers and writers are made more responsible for reading or creating it.

In a survey conducted of book club members and crime fiction readers in New Zealand during August 2011, (25 respondents) more than 60% of the readers confessed that they read crime fiction to be diverted, or entertained by the intellectual challenge, ‘the game’, “putting the puzzle together” (Focus group 2). A moral compulsion was not given as a primary motive for reading crime fiction, however several owned to a sense of justice or righteous anger over criminal behaviour and a sense of catharsis over the anticipated outcome when it is finally achieved. “Satisfaction” was paraphrased as “neatness’ by one respondent, while others liked the way crime fiction “drew loose threads together” (57%). Another point made by respondents was that the series structure of crime fiction, with on-going titles featuring the same character fighting crime meant that they formed a relationship with the character, “became attached” to them. 80% of respondents stated that the character of the protagonist whether male or female, was attractive to them, kept them interested.

Auden (1948) compared detective fiction to Greek tragedy in its formulaic pattern rising to climax (“concealment, manifestation, revelation, catharsis”) and said that “Murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand restitution or grant forgiveness; it is the one crime in which society has a direct interest.”

Again, reflecting on the appeal of the protagonist, one reader/ respondent summed up; “often the investigator , male or female, is a loner or maverick, out on [her/his] own so there’s a David and Goliath aspect to it- they’re often up against big business and corruption, even from their own bosses.” (Interview/focus group 1)

Another pursues a connection with Aristotelian tragedy; “[The] protagonists often have a fatal flaw, they are not successful in their careers as they have stuck to their guns and not compromised their integrity” (Interview/ focus group 2).

In a collection of essays discussing Aristotle’s Ethics and society, Sandrine Berges says, “The kind of crime fiction I am concerned with typically focuses on the portrayal of evil and what happens when we fight it...[R]eading novels can contribute to moral education” (in Chappell, p.212). One effect of crime stories is that they reveal evil in society to those whose lives are comfortable and predictable. One respondent said “ I know it’s escapism but it has elements of real crime – you know there are people capable of that evil in society and the media doesn’t give them to you in such depth” (Interview/focus group 1).

The “King of Tartan Noir”, Ian Rankin, explains “What interests me is the soul of the crime novel--what it tells us about humanity, what it is capable of discussing. Good crime fiction tackles big issues. My own crime novels have discussed themorality of big business, political corruption, child abduction, the drug scene, the ramifications of the oil industry and so on We are all inquisitive and curious animals, learning through questioning, and crime fiction touches this deep need to both ask questions and to get answers.” (1999)

Several readers in the focus groups would agree: “I think most crime writers aren’t interested in glorifying crime but in revealing it as something to be aware of. It is often set against social issues like drug use, the illegal sales of body parts, people trafficking, police corruption or political double dealing.”

“[It’s] Integrity versus corruption”.

“It is not didactic, it’s presenting this bad activity, but also there’s fun and lightness rather than all doom and gloom” (Interview/focus groups 2, 3).

Ngaio Marsh was noted by her peers and fans for the imaginative deaths she devised for her victims; boiling mud pools and wool presses being two “Kiwi” examples. Her decision to

write crime novels in her late 30's while on one of her long visits to Britain, was not taken seriously in NZ until much later, even though this was the most popular form of fiction at that time in the English speaking world. Like two other great New Zealand writers, Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame, she achieved greater fame abroad than at home initially. By 1960 Joan Stevens wrote in her survey, *The New Zealand Novel, 1860 -1965*, “Ngaio Marsh is read by every kind of person, male and female, blockhead and egghead” (Stevens, p.94). With recent reprints and increased popularity for the genre from the televised series of works by her great inspiration, Agatha Christie, her books continue to “not stay long on the shelves” as a bookseller explained to me recently.

Marsh published over 30 crime titles, among other writings, and of these four are set in New Zealand, although elements of “home” appear regularly- a Maori war club or “Mere” on a hunter's wall; a visiting New Zealander becomes an incidental witness, and so on. As a white New Zealand in a post colonial world, and a flamboyantly Anglophile one at that, she alludes to Maori beliefs and practices as exotic, with an outsiders' gaze. Alleyn still stands as “the first bicultural detective” (Drayton, p. 245).

In *Death and the dancing footman*, published in 1940, the chief suspect of the crime is a Jewish refugee from Nazi occupied Austria, a Dr Hart who willingly accepts a trial by British justice over what he has escaped from in his homeland. In lines that bring together ethics, society, history and moral responsibility, Alleyn and Fox have this exchange.

“Does it seem odd to you, Fox, that we should be here so solemnly tracking down one squalid little murderer, so laboriously... while over our heads are stretched the legion of guns? It's as if we stood on the edge of a cracking landslide, swatting flies.”

“Stolid Fox replies simply, “it's our job” (Marsh, p. 104).

Donne said, “Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. “ (*Meditations, xvii*, 1624) . As long as readers choose crime fiction out of the enjoyment of puzzle solving, identification with the characters, a sense of retribution, or out of satisfaction for a well-made story, well –told, it is unlikely that the more challenging and salaciously aggressive line, “Reader, I murdered him” will be hugely successful outside of horror or noir fiction.

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