

A Starving Role

female detectives take centre stage

Female detectives first made their appearance in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1864, the female detective stepped into English fiction in the form of Miss Gladden, a character who investigated a series of dastardly crimes written by James Redding-Ware (under the pen-name Andrew Forrester) and set in London (*The Female Detective*, reprint British Library, 2012). Shortly before this, in *Household Words* in 1856, Dickens published a story written by Wilkie Collins that featured a poor needlewoman who investigates the death of her friend.

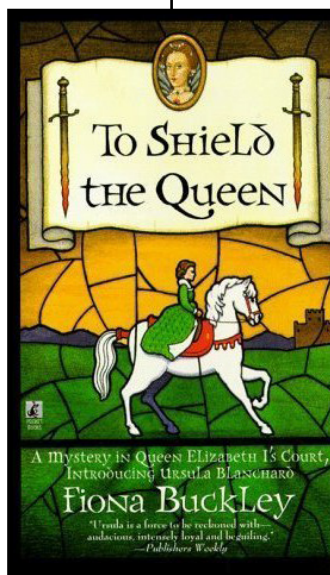
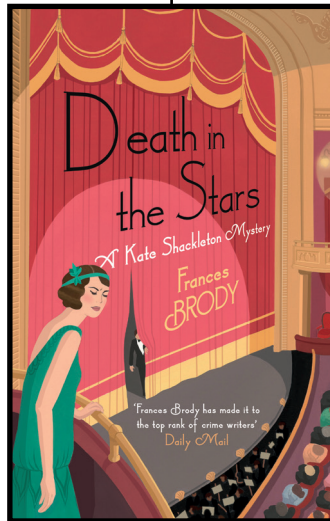
The scene was set for female detectives to step into the limelight, but it is only over the past twenty years that female detectives have begun to flourish in historical fiction, becoming strong contenders for the most popular historical crime fiction characters. From Caroline Lawrence's Flavia, protagonist of her Roman mysteries, to Kate O'Donnell, Patricia Hall's photographer working in 1960s London, female sleuths have taken centre stage. A few of these women detectives, such as Peter Tremayne's seventh-century Irish lawyer and religieuse, Sister Fidelma, and Adelia Aguilar, Ariana Franklin's medieval forensic specialist, have attained an almost cult status.

The longevity of the series of novels in which they feature is a testimony to these female sleuths' continuing rise in popularity. This year, Fiona Buckley is celebrating twenty years since the appearance of Ursula Blanchard, the Elizabethan female detective who now stars in *The Heretic's Creed* (Severn House, 2017). Buckley notes that, in 1996, "I had just finished a six-book series, *Bridges over Time*, written under my own name, Valerie Anand, the story of one family from before the Conquest to the moon landing. I was wondering what to do next. I was considering some sort of crime writing and I was also reading Elizabethan history at the time. I thought of a crime series set in the sixteenth century. I also thought that I wanted to make it 'different' in some way – there were quite a few historical detectives around; Cadfael,

for example. How about a woman lead? It could be interesting. In the sixteenth century, a woman detective would have difficult problems! Also, thinking over my recent reading, I realised that in the Elizabethan age, espionage was practically a national pastime! And that would be a nice variant on simple detection. Ursula was coming into focus."

Buckley says, "I also wondered what kind of woman she would have to be. How would a sixteenth-century woman ever get into such a career? She would need to have some status; so as to mix with people in the political world. She would need, I thought, to have contact with the court." The question remained: "Why would a lady at the Elizabethan court undertake such work? For money? Yes, she might be hard up. But still...then I thought of the well-known mystery of Amy Robsart, the wife of Robert Dudley, who died so mysteriously and whose death seems to have been expected before it happened. What if Ursula were paid to look after her and become involved that way? And then Ursula seemed to take on a life of her own. Since then, I have just let her tell me her story."

Emily Brightwell's stalwart Victorian housekeeper, Mrs Jeffries, debuted in 1993, and the thirty-fifth novel in the series, *Mrs. Jeffries Rights a Wrong* (Berkley, 2017) is due to be published in May. Brightwell and Buckley's characters are "different" and have broken the traditional mould of who detectives can be, but the answer to their increasing readership over the past twenty years possibly lies elsewhere. Today, the female detective characters which grace bookshop shelves come from a range of different social backgrounds, periods and settings. Nicola Upson, for example, joined a growing sub-genre of authors focusing on celebrity sleuths, real people who have been fictionalised in the role of detective. Upson turned Josephine Tey, the crime writer from the Golden Age of detective fiction, into an investigator; Laura Joh Rowland's two-book series featuring Charlotte Brontë also debuted in 2008, as did Justine Picardie's *Daphne* (Bloomsbury,



by Myfanwy Cook

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2008), while Anna Maclean's novels feature Louisa May Alcott as a detective. Lastly, in Susan Wittig Albert's novels, the children's author Beatrix Potter has been transformed into a solver of mysteries. In contrast, P.D. James and Carrie A. Bebris convert a fictional character, Elizabeth Darcy from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, into their private investigator. Surprisingly, all these diverse novels do share a common link: the women are the stars, heroines who are making their mark in a man's world.

American novelist Ann Parker writes, "When creating a protagonist for my Silver Rush historical mystery series, several forces nudged me into fashioning Inez Stannert, who runs the Silver Queen Saloon in 1880s Leadville, Colorado. First, as a child, although I loved reading and watching westerns I quickly realized that the 'guys' had all the fun, which seemed very unfair to me. Decades later, I finally got to remedy that particular gender injustice by creating a strong woman character, making her a 'woman in a man's world,' and tossing her into all kinds of situations and adventures. I also wanted to create a morally ambiguous female protagonist – someone who paced the thin line between right and wrong, and didn't hesitate to step into the darkness if doing so got the results she wanted. At the time I was pondering this, there were many male protagonists of this ilk but few female protagonists."

Frances Brody, whose ninth Kate Shackleton adventure, *Death in the Stars* (Piatkus, 2017), will appear in October, has created the character of a young woman who was born in 1891, whose husband is killed in the First World War, and who undertakes her first case in 1922 at the age of thirty-one. Kate Shackleton, like Inez Stannert, faces a world that is still dominated by men, but is on the cusp of a change. Brody explains, "Historical or not, female detectives are generally good company. They go about their business with grace, competence and a sense of humour. Mould-breaking female detectives are dab hands at overcoming obstacles. They circumvent difficulties and deceit in pursuit of truth and justice. Smart, empathetic, witty and a touch devious, they are like the friend one turns to in times of trouble. As to my chosen historical period, I'm under no illusions about how hard my family's lives were in the 1920s, and yet it was a fascinating time that holds a deep attraction. I like tipping out hidden pockets of history that I'm convinced readers will enjoy finding out about."

Brody's "mould breaking" character has captured the imagination of other non-historical fiction writers, such as Lee Child. Is this because of the female detective's ability to overcome challenges? This includes not only the challenge of trying to establish her worth against the prejudice of her period, but also the challenge of making a living. The Molly Murphy series, written by Rhys Bowen and set at the turn of the century in New York; Boris Akunin's Sister Pelagia novels; Amelia Peabody, a Victorian spinster with an interest in archaeology, created by Barbara Mertz (writing as Elizabeth Peters); and Carola Dunn's article-writing Daisy Dalrymple are examples of women striving to forge their own careers. In a similar way, Ann Granger's Lizzy Martin, a lady's companion; Jacqueline Winspear's Maisie Dobbs, with her experience in battlefield nursing; Fiona Veitch

Smith's Poppy Denby, a perky 1920s heroine; and Mary Miley's Hollywood-based investigator, Jessie Beckett, have all not only broken old moulds, but created an entirely new one – that of the working-woman detective.

Not all find work a necessity – many noteworthy female detectives over the past two decades have come from the upper echelons of society. Yet as Rhys Bowen's character Georgiana, thirty-fourth in line to the throne of England, aptly remarks in *Heirs and Graces* (Constable, 2013): "I want a life of my own, not to be a hanger-on in someone else's life." This is a sentiment echoed by Phryne Fisher, Kerry Greenwood's wealthy Australian 1920s amateur detective, and Tasha Alexander's Victorian detective, Lady Emily Hargreaves, who relishes the prospect of "going about without anyone recognising who you are" (*Tears of Pearl*, Minotaur US, 2009 / Constable UK, 2015).

Whether the detective is a captivatingly beautiful socialite like Amory Ames in Ashley Weaver's 1930s series or an eccentric child investigator, such as Flavia de Luce in Alan Bradley's series set at Bucksaw Manor in the 1950s, one thing is clear: female sleuths have become the stars of historical crime fiction. Kaite Welsh's first novel, *The Wages of Sin* (Pegasus Books, 2017), is set in the underworld of Victorian Edinburgh and features, as Welsh describes her, "fallen woman-turned-medical student-turned-detective Sarah Gilchrist." Welsh explains, "Women – like the LGBT community and people of colour – are written out of history too often. I wanted to put them back where they belonged."

Miss Gladden explains in *The Female Detective* that, "it may be said the value of the detective lies not so much in discovering facts, as in putting them together, and finding out what they mean." For readers, the proliferation of women detectives over the past twenty years has not only been entertaining, but has also introduced them to the underworld of history through the eyes of intelligent and independent women. They may sometimes work in tandem with men – for instance, the handsome Milo in the novels of Ashley Weaver, or Inspector Witherspoon, whose housekeeper Mrs Jeffries solves crimes alongside her housework in Emily Brightwell's novels. No longer, however, are female sleuths Dr Watson-style sidekicks, serving only as foil to the great (male) detective. Female detectives have come of age and are now fixed as intelligent and entertaining mystery solvers in the growing firmament of historical crime fiction. ❀

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