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The Genderization of Crime Fiction from
the Victorian Era to the Modern Day

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The Genderization of Crime Fiction from the Victorian Era to the Modern Day

Ever since I was introduced to them at a very young age, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories have been associated for me with the "female" world. My mother is the one who first read the stories to me before bedtime, and she and I soon developed a special tradition of Sherlock Holmes tea parties during which we would drink tea, eat pastries, and watch episodes from the Granada series. As I have grown older, it seems as if most of the Sherlock Holmes fans I meet are women, both in everyday life and in online fandom, with all of them sharing my great love for these characters who stand as an international icon of the crime fiction genre. In recent years, however, I have begun to realize that not everyone sees crime fiction as having such an extensive female aspect. On the contrary, many people tend to envision the mystery genre with a "boy's club" attitude, as if these stories are almost all written by men, about men, and for men. Curious to know where this attitude comes from when so many mystery enthusiasts are, in fact, women, I began looking into the origins of British crime fiction in the Victorian Era, tracing its progression from sensation fiction to the debut of Sherlock Holmes. I quickly realized that crime fiction was originally "feminine" in its sensation fiction origins but became increasingly masculinized as the genre developed. Eventually, Doyle's stories set forth the detective duo archetype of two white middle-class males, and it has remained the genre's defining model ever since. In assembling this book collection, I explore this transition from feminine to masculine in the crime fiction genre of British literature and question to what extent modern day authors are both challenging this model and remaining confined by it.

As anyone who knows much about crime fiction's history will tell you, the genre arose out of the popular Victorian genre of sensation fiction. Often seen as written for a female audience (as demonstrated in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*), sensation fiction used many

intriguing plot elements from Gothic fiction, such as murder or a haunted past, but placed them into a domestic setting. As a result, the genre focused on the dangers surrounding the typically female realm of domestic life and therefore had stories driven by female worries, often starring female protagonists. In my collection, I have included a selection of works from both Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the authors who shaped the sensation fiction genre and whose works still remain in circulation today. All of the works included have the above-described fascination with the dangers of domestic life and the ways in which women could be threatened through the actions of their husbands or other men on whom their lives depended. However, these works also all have mystery plots, as well as a great deal of sleuthing activity which is sometimes carried out with great gusto by the women themselves. As a result, sensation fiction demonstrates the Victorian female audience's clear interest in mysteries and detective work, especially when these mysteries focused on dangers that affected their own lives.

As actual detectives began to emerge in sensation fiction, however, such characters were always male. The detectives in Collins' *The Moonstone* and Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* are all male, while the sleuthing women in Collins' *The Law and the Lady* and *The Woman in White* must do their detective work in the face of adamant protestation from the men around them. Despite the importance of women in these stories, the official detectives—the *real* detectives—are still men, just as in real life. This fact is hardly surprising, however, as crime fiction emerged as a distinct genre from sensation fiction alongside the development of actual detective work in Victorian Britain, as shown in Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher* which provides an excellent investigation into the side-by-side development of these two areas. Peter Ackroyd's *London: A Biography* and Matthew Kaiser's *Crime and Horror in Victorian London* also provide a great deal of information on this fictional transition based on real-world changes.

Since the detectives in the paper and the Metropolitan Police were all male, so were the fictional detectives engraining themselves into the minds of British writers and readers alike.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories came as the final act that completed this masculinization of crime fiction from its feminine sensation fiction origins. Although there were certainly many other crime fiction writers besides Doyle at the time, as seen in Leslie S. Klinger's *In the Shadow of Sherlock Holmes* and Michael Sims' *The Dead Witness*, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson became the detective duo by which all other stories were judged. A crime story was seen as good not based on the criteria of being well-written and interesting, but rather based on the question of whether it was as good as a Sherlock Holmes adventure. Doyle's stories have dominated our conception of what crime fiction should be ever since the late 1800s, and its supreme influence continues to this day. Fictional female detectives certainly did exist in the Victorian Era, as seen in Michael Sims' *The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime*, but they are not the detectives that we remember. In fact, most people would probably be surprised to hear they existed at all. Instead, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson became our archetype for how detective stories should work and, most importantly, what kinds of people these stories should feature in their starring roles. The detective duo as white, middle-class, and, above all, male is a model which persists to this day and which has only recently begun to be challenged.

Since the 1970s, female sleuths and female authors have finally begun making their way into the crime fiction market with steadily increasing numbers. This rise of women as protagonists in the mystery genre is investigated at great length in Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones' *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*, with particular focus on the unique features of the female detective's voice and such stories' connection to feminist ideas. For my collection's examples of how the crime fiction genre is challenging but

still in some ways confined by the Sherlock Holmes model, I have mostly chosen novels and television shows which have clear connections to that archetype. For instance, BBC's *Luther* and Stieg Larrson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* both feature detective duo models that fit into the Sherlock Holmes character types and yet challenge our expectations of gender, class, and, in the case of *Luther*, race as well. However, not all modern day stories are so progressive, and I have also included BBC's *Sherlock* as an example of how the confining "white middle-class male" model remains pervasive in our expectation of whom detective stories should showcase. Yet the development of online fan communities made up primarily of women has created the opportunity for female audiences to directly challenge such enduring models, as in the case of the fan fiction story "The Narrator" by Candle Beck. Female audiences, who have often been overlooked in the mystery genre, now have the opportunity to assert their voices as critics and even as creators without first needing the approval of a publisher. Although modern day crime fiction still has its difficulties in breaking away from outdated models of the detective duo, new authors and audiences who desire diversity and respectful representation of all types of people are making it possible for these models to be overturned.

Although my great love for Sherlock Holmes and John Watson endures to this day, I believe their limitation of women's roles in crime fiction should have ended long ago, or even have never begun in the first place. Detectives have such a powerful role because they uncover truth in the midst of confusion and shine light into the darkness. By giving that role in fiction only to a very limited type of person, we make it much more difficult to imagine the possibility that someone else—a woman, a person of color, a member of the lower class—could fulfill that same role in real life. Although I will enjoy rereading Sherlock Holmes stories for years to come, I look forward to reading new crime fiction tales that go beyond such limitations.