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Female Emancipation in Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski Novels, and her Influence on Contemporary Crime Fiction

Edited by

Enrico Minardi and Jennifer Byron

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INTRODUCTION

CRIME FICTION, MORE THAN MERE ENTERTAINMENT: THE ROLE OF THE CRIME NOVEL AS A PLATFORM FOR GENDER-NEGOTIATIONS ON A GLOBAL SCALE

ENRICO MINARDI

At the start of this introductory essay, I first have to provide the reader with some information regarding how and when I became interested in the work of Sara Paretsky. It is true, Warshawski's novels are famous worldwide, new novels are constantly being published and have been translated into many languages for more than 30 years (*Indemnity Only* was first published in 1982), and in 1991 Mill Creek Entertainment Studio released the film *V.I. Warshawski* with Kathleen Turner. It was not a huge commercial success (and far from being an artistic achievement), yet despite this it provided Paretsky's character with further international exposure.

Nonetheless, it is important to make an important and preliminary point. Whilst certainly impressive, Paretsky's commercial success is not comparable to that enjoyed by other contemporary crime-fiction authors in the US and elsewhere such as James Patterson, Mary Higgins Clark, Donna Leon, Patricia Cornwell, Sue Grafton, Ken Follett, Patricia Highsmith, and others of this kind. There is naturally a reason for that. Crime fiction as a whole (not considering its division into subgenres) is certainly one of the few best-selling literary genres worldwide. Relevant royalties come furthermore from their frequent TV series and movie adaptations, and it is not rare for crime fiction writers to take up jobs as full time screenwriters, or the other way around, for screenwriters to become very successful crime fiction writers. Some examples of the latter are worldwide renowned authors such as Sue Grafton, Andrea Camilleri in

Italy, and Petros Markaris in Greece. Journalists such as Stieg Larsson and Patricia Cornwell have been able to channel their deep knowledge of specific sectors (financial and forensic) into a very successful literary career. In France, former police officers such as Simon Michaël and Olivier Marchal have been recruited by the movie and television industry in various roles (Marchal has for instance become a famous actor and director) to help them to renew and keep the genre alive thanks to their direct personal experience of the *milieu*. Still in France, even a former inmate such as Frank Henry (who spent nine years in prison) has become for the very same reasons a well-respected director and screen player. This list could continue to include many more directors and writers from various other countries.

It is indeed the international commercial viability of the genre that makes it very palatable for writers, publishers, or TV producers in search of easy money. However, this same success also increases and stiffens up the structural constraints of the genre, wearing out its identity into a 'formula' ready for success and availability worldwide. Worldwide crime fiction related products (either books or movies) seem to have in fact become more and more homogeneous, and crime fiction can be considered a translational genre. In this regard, a parallel can be drawn with the Nineteen century's swashbuckler, where courageous adventurers in distant and exotic lands found them trapped in sudden treacherous situations, fighting against extremely wicked felons. As it has already been ascertained, their victorious struggle was supposed to provide western audiences with the psychological reassurance about the fact that the wild and the primitive could always be subdued and tamed, and civilization could never ultimately fail to take over. It is also known that this need for reassurance arose at the edges of the industrial revolution when countries like England and France faced dramatic social transformations, and colonies started playing a major role as suppliers of wealth and power. The swashbuckler has been consequently accurately interpreted and studied as an intellectual by-product of colonial domination, which has played a major role in shaping western perception of non-Western countries and cultures.

My question now is if this parallel between swashbuckler and crime fiction can be drawn even further, and the crime-fiction phenomenon be examined within the same post-colonial conceptual context. Which ultimately seems to be possible, based on what I have already shown, namely 1) the hegemonic place crime fiction has in the current cultural market worldwide; 2) the homogenization this predominance has induced in regards to how the genre is internationally delivered format-wise. In

other and much simpler words, is crime-fiction still able to address reality? Does it still hold any kind of responsibilities toward the present time, or, as swashbuckler, its bottom line has just become mere entertainment?

The main issue seems to stem from the code crime fiction is using, which is reality itself, and more largely from the structural reasons, or *raison d'être*, of the genre, which seems to consist in reassuring readers and audiences about the scientific possibility of defeating evil. The genre's birth and success are clearly very much related to the age of positivism in the second half of Nineteen century, and the paradigmatic change it brought about in Western mentalities. The identity of crime fiction seems in fact to be rooted in this new aspect of the modern Western mindset: the confidence in the power of a fictional code such as literature (and then cinema) to reflect the victorious (thanks to sciences) struggle of society against evil. Furthermore, the fact of endowing science with all kind of powers has been again accurately interpreted as another aspect of that colonial mindset I have already discussed. Science in this respect can be in fact considered as another piece of evidence for reasserting the legitimacy of Western domination over the entire world.

Nonetheless, in post-modern times it is by now a commonly accepted fact that fictional codes cannot reflect reality as such, and all supposedly realistic narrations are by all means fictional ones. Additionally, western mentalities have grown skeptical about the possibility of a scientific defeat of evil. Crime fiction seems therefore to have been emptied out of its ideological original function, and relegated to mere means of entertainment.

In order to avert this seemingly fatal downfall into cliché and stereotypes, and pump new air in the supposedly dead body of the genre, I am convinced that first of all it is necessary to redefine the metaphysical nature of evil. When I speak of metaphysics I do not intend to allude to something unreal, but to the necessity to adopt a radical philosophical standpoint in addressing the question of evil in present time. I believe in fact that even the issue of the code (the supposed inability to address reality due to its fictional nature) cannot be overcome other than starting from this very specific standpoint. And that accordingly the genre can renew the ties with its traditional and ideological origin (based-as I mentioned above-on the possibility of a scientific and systematic struggle against evil), and leave behind its present status of mere entertainment. As a matter of fact, crime fiction's identity cannot be but rooted in this ideological postulate, which has nonetheless nowadays lost-as I have already shown-all its heuristic ground. It is therefore only founding the struggle against evil on a metaphysical necessity that the genre's identity

is reactivated and still makes sense, along with the function of its realistic code to address reality.

What is, according to Paretsky, this metaphysical definition of the evil? It comes from embracing a radical feminist standpoint and hence interpreting the struggle between the genders as permeating all aspects of life. More precisely-and from a point of view related to Nietzschean philosophy-the fact that this struggle for power underlies all aspects of the gender relationship, has as a consequence that this relation needs a constant and endless negotiation in order to keep at bay the violence of which this struggle essentially consists. In other words, the gender relation cannot be but violent, and the only means to keep this violence at the lowest possible level is through continuous dialectical negotiation. Nevertheless, in real life women are certainly the victims in this struggle, and the only possibility women have to counter male domination seems often to be through open bursts of violence. Here is where crime fiction makes complete sense given that it is the only modern literary genre traditionally based on the representation of violence as the result of the struggle between good and evil. And if-following Paretsky's view-evil is the (violent) male domination; good is represented by how women react violently to it in order to open a possible room for negotiation between the genders. In this struggle, women (namely V.I. Warshawski) cannot but take part with all kinds of victims (as all Warshawski's novels series clearly show), given that all of them are ultimately victims of a power, and the patriarchal domination seems to be the archetypical power that all others can be compared to and somehow stem from. As an additional consequence, Paretsky never abstains from representing the sufferance of the body which is the first and most direct target of this violence. Repeatedly Warshawski undergoes serious injuries and long period of hospitalization or inactivity due to this violence, and Paretsky never wants the reader to forget that, in the gender struggle, the primary object of domination and constraint is the female body. This full bodily implication is the reason why I believe Warshawski's novels possess an exemplary value (or even in some ways a religious one). In fact, the radical manner in which Paretsky represents how Warshawski "throws-as the Italian author Pier Paolo Pasolini would say-her own body into the struggle" makes of her an exemplary figure, and endow the Warshawski's series with an underlying ethical powerful message. Because of her extreme exposure to violence, Warshawski comes then to represent the first victim calling for justice on behalf of all others. Paretsky's novels are not just for entertainment (even if they are very engaging to read), because they contain a compelling call for a better world where the negotiation would

be how genders relate to each other on a regular basis (and consequently all forms of power would disappear or weaken). The genre of crime fiction (and the hard-boiled subgenre the Warshawski series clearly depends upon) becomes therefore just a chance for Paretsky to express at best her call for a renewal and revolution of social gender roles. Which is a revolution of society as such.

Paretsky's fundamental feminist commitment is the main reason why, when working on the first stages of our book's project, Jennifer Byron and I put out a call for papers referring explicitly to the existing ties between crime fiction genre and feminism. Which of course, is naturally not a very original or surprising move; at least as far as American crime fiction is concerned. Since the rise in the Eighties of writers such as Marcia Muller, Paretsky, Liza Cody, and Sue Grafton, a wide variety of bibliographical contributions trying to make sense of these ties have been available.[1] What is instead new, or what is at least new in our opinion, is a collection of studies on the international influence of the feminist example as radically carried out by Paretsky in her novels. In other words, our project's originality-we believe- consists of having assembled a roster of contributors willing to scrutinize and assess the presence of a crime fiction feminist genre within the literary landscape corresponding to their professional endeavor.[2] We consequently asked our contributors to draw parallels (even if indirect) between the results of their search and Paretsky's works. We had planned from the start to focus just on Paretsky because-as I hope having already made clear-of her role as the forerunner

[1]Between the most relevant ones, I shall at least include the following ones: Reddy, Maureen T. *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime* (New York: Continuum, 1988); Klein, Kathleen Gregory. *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Id. *Great Women Mystery Writers: A Biocritical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994); Munt, Sally R. *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994); Irons, Glenwood, ed. *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Walton, Priscilla L., and Jones, Manina. *Detective Agency. Women Rewriting the hard-Boiled Tradition* (Berkley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1999); Plain, Gill. *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction. Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edimburgh: Edimburgh University Press, 2001, and Chicago, Ill.: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001).

[2]I have at least to cite the two following works: the special issue of *Letras Femeninas*, dedicated to "La Novela Criminal Femenina." Ed. S. Godsland. 28.1 (2002), which however only regards authors of the Spanish-speaking world; the study by Amanda C. Seaman on Japanese female crime-fiction (*Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990's Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

of the feminist engagement in crime fiction, which she had remained faithful to (and still does) in the most rigorous and uncompromising way. We have been then able to collect very relevant and original contributions on feminism and crime fiction in diverse countries and with a very distinguished literary tradition such as Japan (Jooheyon Rhee), Italy (Alessia Risi), France (Andrea Hynyne), Brazil (Cristina-Pinto Bailey), Argentina (Jennifer Byron), and Greece (Patricia Felisia Barbeito). Two other essays examine instead-still from a feminist standpoint-two aspects of Paretsky works which appertain to two fundamental features of her novels: the sleuth's body and its sufferance (Elizabeth Thompson), and the role of the city of Chicago as supplier of the necessary authenticating backdrop of Warshawski's investigations (Margaret Kinsman). Lastly, we had the enormous honor to have Sara Paretsky herself write the first chapter to our book, for which to her we are very grateful.

Jooyeon Rhee examines one of the most original features of feminist crime fiction which is the strong bond created by women in distress, given that typically the P.I. tends to also offer the victim a sort of psychological support ("Are you my Friend or Enemy? Female Friendship at the Crossroads of Class, race, and Gender in Sara Paretsky's and Natsuo Kirino's Detective Fiction"). As opposed to the rhetoric of "we are all sisters," Rhee stresses instead the complexity of this bonding due to women's differences (social, racial, and gender-wise) and the ability of both Paretsky's Warshawski and Kirino's Miro Murano in constructing inclusive female communities which reverse those barriers. Rhee examines three novels of the Miro series, OUT (1997), *The Night Abandoned by Angels* (1994), and *Dark* (2005), drawing parallels with Paretsky's *Guardian Angels* (1992), and *Total Recall* (2001). She concludes by stressing the function of violence (in Kirino), and anger (in Paretsky), as the two typical feelings experienced by their two female P.I. characters when they become aware of these underlying implications, and consequently the necessity to address them in order to be able to resolve their cases.

Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey focuses her attention on the *novela negra*, or hard boiled crime fiction novels, by the Brazilian writer Sonia Coutinho, author of the P.I. series of Dora Diamante (""From V.I. Warshavski to Dora Diamante": Sonia Coutinho and the Gendered Crime Fiction in Brazil"). She begins with reminding the reader of the limited popularity the genre enjoys in Brazil due to the political repression and social disharmony the country has undergone since the 1964 military coup. She points out that the genre has nevertheless achieved success in its Brazilian variation known as *romance-reportagem*, a form of 'novelistic

report' in which media exposes that which would be censored, police brutality and state violence. Pinto-Bailey hereafter describes Sonia Coutinho's professional background as a translator who becomes interested in crime-fiction having translated novels by Paretsky herself. She goes on to bring special attention to Coutinho's Dora Diamante series (*O caso Alice*, and *Os seios de Pandora*), which shares many similarities with Warshawski's (between others, the urban post-modern setting, and the demand for female identity empowerment). On the other hand, she stresses the jigsaw puzzle's form Coutinho's narrative usually takes, which endows it with a structure similar to that of a puzzle-solving process.

Felicia Barbeito tackles the gender's problematic form from a slightly different point of view than the previous scholars. In her essay ("Telling the Ewes from the Rams: Economics and Gender Disorder in Petros Markaris Inspector Haritos Mysteries") she examines inspector Haritos famous Greek author Markaris's character by drawing a very original parallel between Warshawski and Haritos's action as community-builders to oppose the social disorder brought in by corporate crime (or, in Haritos's series, by the disastrous effects of globalization on Greek society). Particularly, she analyzes how, in Haritos "crisis trilogy" (and especially in its last part, *A long, long time ago*) Markaris's parodistic depiction of the conventional gender roles in the hardboiled genre brings about a radical socio-economical criticism. Barbeito's conceptual focus is the feeling of 'reflective nostalgia' as experienced by Haritos as a complementary condition of the state of gender-disorder he is undergoing. Additionally, the many scenes of shopping the novels include (which take place during the Haristos's package-tour in Istanbul) represent the way in which commodity culture tries to divert nostalgia (and the history of the conflicting relationship between the Greeks and Turks) into the fake unity of consumerism. It will instead be through food's consumption that Haristos will lastly find the unifying factor (which however does not help him to resolve any of his own contradictions) allowing him to unveil the mystery.

Elizabeth Thompson ("Turning Towards the Things That Make you Afraid": Growing Pains in Sara Paretsky's Feminist Hard-Boiled Fiction") engages the meaning and role of women's sufferance as represented in V.I. novels, to show that V.I.'s exemplary (endowed hence with a strong feminist message) value is best expressed in the way she deals with violence and pain which is that of never facing them with a passive attitude (even if this kind of 'activism' has been criticized as masochistic). This attitude is instead what Thompson intends to expose first by examining a few female writers between the Nineteenth and Twentieth

century (such as Carolyn Heilbrun), and the way they have started this process of exposure. Then, by tackling on a theoretical level the problematic relation of pain and language, stressing the necessity-as it has come out in different fields of human experience-of finding a voice for it, so as to share it and therefore diminish it. Lastly, Thompson keenly analyzes the literary strategy adopted by Paretsky in establishing this connection in novels such as *Burn Marks* and *Total Recall*. She is consequently able to prove how W.I.'s experience of pain (and the way she deals with it) is precisely what endows her series with that necessary realism to make it credible, particularly as far as her endeavor for social justice is concerned.

In her very thorough essay ("Approaches to Gender: Grazia Verasani's Cantini Series"), Alessia Risi begins by summarizing the historical role of female writers such as Paretsky, Muller, Grafton and others in reversing and exposing the conventionality of gender roles-along the underlying conservative values-as depicted in traditional hardboiled crime fiction. She then examines the recent Italian crime fiction production as a time when a similar reversal has taken place, and many female writers have come to the forefront, the most important of which is doubtlessly Grazia Verasani, author of the successful Giorgia Cantini's series. Risi examines the series of four novels particularly pointing out the role of death's investigation as the Verasani favorite way of exposing the identity of both the investigator and the victim. Therefore, the definition of Verasani's work is that of 'existential noir' because the crime's investigation is usually represented through the emotional reflection it has on the investigator. Risi then engages in a very interesting comparison between W.I and Cantini's characters, stressing in particular the latter's most noticeable tendency toward psychological inquires which also expose her own contradiction and doubts, reactivating somehow the figure of the 'loser' like that of Chandler and Hammet's heroes. However, Cantini's unconventional character is how Verasani effectively puts into question social gender conventions.

Jennifer Byron's essay ("Challenging the Male Paradigm: A Comparative Analysis of the Protagonists V. I. Warshawski and Nurist Iscar as Models of Postfeminism in Crime Literature") begins by examining the history of *la novela negra* in Argentina and how Claudia Piñeiro's novel *Betibú* (2011) reflects the traits of the postmodern *novela negra* in that the central crime spirals outward to include other inter-related crimes and tends to explore several other themes apart from murder during the process, such as: sexism, white-collar crime, and socio-economic disparities within the nation etc. But what truly sets the novel apart is that one sees the

"traditional detective's" evolution from that of the investigative journalist, into a fiction writer who attempts to unravel the crime. Through analyzing Piñeiro's novel, Byron brings to light the disconcerting fact that works written by women of crime literature in Spanish speaking countries are often underappreciated or discounted by academics and literary critics. As a result, Piñeiro uses her protagonist Nurit Iscar, a previously successful *novela negra* writer who as retired from the business, to address the sexist reaction of literary critics toward female authors. Byron's essay then draws parallels between the protagonists Nurit Iscar in *Betibú* and V.I. Warshawski in Sara Paretsky's novel *Deadlock* (1984), as women who challenge and dare to enter male-dominated spaces, and fight for gender equality and recognition in the workforce, thus falling within the definition of postfeminist protagonists.

The thorough analysis conducted by Andrea Hynynen ("Following in the footsteps of Sara Paretsky: feminism and the female detective in Maud Tabachnik's crime novels") examines the detective Sandra Kahn, the first serial lesbian detective protagonist, at the center of French crime author Maud Tabachnik's novels. Her work opens with a detailed historical and theoretical discussion of the dynamics between feminist crime fiction in France and its relation to American feminist crime fiction. This is then followed by the comparative analysis of the various feminist engagements of Sandra Kahn within several novels, including: *J'ai regardé le diable en face* (2005), *Ne vous retournez pas* (2010), *Un été pourri* (1994) and V.I. Warshawski in Sara Partesky's series. In doing so, Hynynen affirms that Tabachnik demonstrates a far more aggressive feminist output than Paretsky, especially in regards to depicting male-female relationships as well as Tabachnik's protagonist's attitude towards men. Finally, the manner in which certain themes such as cultural, ethnical identity, class and violence and their intersection with gender is addressed and closely examined by Hynynen in both Tabachnik and Paretsky's novels.

Margaret Kinsman returns to a theme which she had explored twenty years prior in an essay which fixated on the role of Chicago's urban landscape in Sara Paretsky's novels. However, In addition to discussing the role of the streets of Chicago in this essay ("Gabriella's Voice Returned"), which have helped to develop V.I.'s character and contribute to her autonomous attitude, Kinsman also presents the significance of several possessions V.I. inherited from her deceased mother Gabriella Sestiere. These objects serve as a medium of memory and storytelling of her mother's past, and also act as conduits for V.I. to expel her emotions, who is an otherwise unsentimental character. This in turn provides the reader with a more intimate understanding of the protagonist, and the

memories that are added to the pre-existing narration merge to produce a multi-layered spatial and temporal narration. The back-story of Gabriella Sestiere whom is of Italian-Jewish heritage and marries Tony Warshawski, a beat-cop of Polish-Catholic decent, demonstrates several of the many communities that populate Chicago, and enriches the cultural, sociological, and historical atmosphere of the detective series. Ultimately, V.I.'s family's history further solidifies her strong and enduring character, being the daughter of an immigrant whom struggled to assimilate to the streets of the Windy City.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DETECTIVE AS SPEECH

SARA PARETSKY

An early letter I received after publishing my first book, *Indemnity Only*, came from a woman who wanted to know why V.I. Warshawski was allowed to "talk back" to men without being punished. The writer wasn't seeking help in learning how to "talk back" as a woman; she was criticizing V.I. for behaving in a way that was neither right nor natural.

The letter was profoundly disturbing, since it seemed to scream in all caps that the writer had been subject to such severe abuse that she thought submission was women's only appropriate behavior.

V.I.'s lippiness is in the long-established tradition of sardonic detectives. When I started writing, I took my cue from Carroll John Daly's Race Williams, the first of the hard-boiled detectives, and from Philip Marlowe. V.I. talked back because all good PI's do.

I wasn't thinking about speech when I started *Indemnity Only*, but about sex: I was reacting to crime novels where women's sexual behavior almost inevitably determined whether the writer viewed them as villain, victim, or (passive) heroine.

My detective had a long gestation, dating back to my reading Raymond Chandler when I was twenty-three. In all but one of his novels, the villains are women who use their bodies in an effort to get good boys to do bad things. I was particularly struck by the gymnastics that Carmen Sternwood performs in *The Big Sleep*. When she first encounters Marlowe, in the entrance to her father's mansion,

> [Carmen] turned her body slowly and lithely, without lifting her feet. Her hands dropped limp at her sides. She tilted herself towards me on her toes. She fell straight back into my arms. I had to catch her or let her crack her head on the tessellated floor. I caught her under her arms and she went rubber-legged on me instantly. I had to hold her close to hold her up. When her head was against my chest she screwed it around and giggled at me.

It's Sternwood who is behind all the mayhem in *The Big Sleep*. She kills one man herself, but for the most part, she uses her body to persuade men to kill other men on her behalf.

Reading Chandler changed the lens through which I saw a lot of western literature."The woman that thou gavest to me made me do it," Adam whines to God in the Garden of Eden. In noir fiction, women with a sex life were particularly wicked, but in the more reserved English novels of the so-called Golden Age of crime fiction, a woman who was divorced or widowed was an unreliable narrator. Such a woman was seldom the main villain, but the fact that she had had a sex life allied her with villains. Dorothy Sayers' Harriet Vane was a kind of exception, but only because she remained rigidly chaste after her unfortunate lover's murder.

Most chaste fictional women were benign or the object of a hero's love, but rarely could a virginal woman solve problems on her own. This made Margery Allingham's Amanda Fitton and Nicholas Blake's Georgia Strangeways unusual and appealing.

For eight years after meeting Carmen Sternwood, I imagined writing a private eye novel with a woman hero. Every now and then I'd write a page or two about a woman named Minerva Daniels, as wooden and derivative a character as you could ever hope to meet. She was, in essence, Philip Marlowe in drag. She drank cheap bar whisky, smoked, and started her detecting life when a slim-hipped, broad-shouldered man with an assumed name came into her office. In my imagination, he was going to look like the angel in the house, but turn out to be the devil.

Even though I'd been writing fiction, albeit privately, most of my life, I had no confidence I could write in a public voice. I was further hampered by Minerva's cardboard persona, although I only realized that in retrospect. It wasn't until I was working as a marketing manager for a multi-national insurance company that V.I.'s voice came to me. I was part of the first wave of women to enter the professions and management in large numbers. We were the beneficiaries of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was meant to outlaw discrimination based on race or sex in education and the workplace. It took fifteen years of litigation, of lonely battles and a lot of heroism by women who lost their jobs in the struggle, before we got access to professional schools, as well as to job paths out of various pink-collar ghettos (women were deemed strong enough to carry hundred-pound bags of laundry in hotels, but too weak to work construction, for example.)

In the late 1970's, when I left my last clerical job and entered management, I and my female peers readily found men who were willing to mentor us and support us. We also encountered those who resented our

presence in their preserves and tried to bully us out of the way. It was while working for one of those bullies that my detective came to me.

I can still remember the day, October, dreary as only Chicago can be when the leaves have fallen from the trees, looking down at Grant Park while enduring a particularly stressful meeting. I was wishing I had the guts to say what was in the balloon over my head, instead of paying lip-service to my boss, and in the middle of that wish, V.I. appeared—almost as if my fairy godmother had heard me and waved a wand.

Instead of Philip Marlowe in drag, my detective would be a woman like me and my friends: doing a job that hadn't existed for us when we were growing up and facing the harassment that we all faced. Maybe we were too afraid to speak up, to fight back, but my detective didn't care if people called her strident, she didn't worry about being fired, she wasn't afraid to take chances.

In the middle of the meeting, I began imagining her. Big enough physically to take on punks. The product of Chicago's rough steel-mill neighborhood, where girls grew up knowing how to defend themselves on the streets. Her father a cop, so that she had a natural entree into the police world. Her mother a refugee from Mussolini's Italy, as a way for me to find my way back to my own family's tormented European history.

Later that fall, I began writing *Indemnity Only*. The road to publication wasn't quick—once I'd finished the book and found an agent, thanks to Stuart Kaminsky—another man who was a steadfast mentor to women—it was hard to persuade New York publishers to take a chance on V.I. A private eye was supposed to be a man, and was supposed to operate out of New York or California. (One editor explained that a book set in Chicago had regional interest only and not enough people read in the Midwest to make it worthwhile to publish a book set here.)

Indemnity Only was published in 1982, at a time when second-wave feminism was riding high. 1982 also marked the year that women in Chicago were first allowed to take the detective exam and serve with the regular police force, instead of as auxiliaries working with juveniles and at the women's detention centers.

We women writers saw the world opening before us: Marcia Muller's 1977 *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, Liza Cody's 1980 *Bad Company*, and Grafton's and my 1982 debuts, opened a floodgate of women writing about believable strong women. By 1995, we had women forensic scientists, process servers, cops, and in every other profession that keeps the mean streets a little more civil.

However, the pushback against second-wave feminism had begun before I even started my first novel. In the United States, this took the

form of an aggressive assault on women's reproductive health in the social-political arena, and the use of rape or the threat of rape as a silencing tactic in fiction and film.

Whereas in the heyday of noir, a vamp was a villain, today the female presence in thrillers and crime fiction is often as the victim of horrific assault. The change began at first as a threat, but escalated rapidly into graphic rape, dismemberment and death during the making of snuff films.

Rex Stout, a vocal supporter of the First Amendment in public life, was less welcoming to women's speech. His last Nero Wolfe book, *A Family Affair*, (1975) features a feminist—strident and hostile, as feminists are frequently described—who refuses to answer the questions put to her by Archie Goodwin and Saul Panzer, the detectives who work for Wolfe. Goodwin advises Panzer to rape the woman to force her to co-operate in an interrogation. Archie is saying that as a feminist, she is speaking out of turn—in this case, she is keeping silent out of turn: she is refusing to speak when Archie and Saul command her to.

As women began taking up more space, both in fiction and the workplace, assault on them began to take center stage in mainstream fiction and film In *Rising Sun*, for instance, we are shown over and over the murder of a prostitute in the middle of a sadistic sex act.

In crime fiction, many books are set in the world of prostitution and sex trafficking. Some writers, most famously Stieg Larsson in the *Millennium Trilogy*, are writing with the expressed goal of exposing the horrors of what is an indisputably horrible part of modern life. A number of other internationally bestselling writers, many of them feminists, share this stated purpose in focusing on the abuse of women in their work.

The line between exploitation and exposure is a hard one to walk. While I'm aware of and appalled by the widespread abuse of women—including trafficking, slavery, enforced prostitution, and murder for pleasure—I haven't figured out a way to address this massive violation in my own fiction.

If a novel is treating a difficult topic, it should ideally raise awareness through story, without preaching or deliberate titillation. I haven't found a narrative vehicle for myself as a writer that achieves that balance. However, given the number of writers who do graphically describe assault, my absence is probably not noticeable.

Recent books show women hung from the ceiling in cages, women sodomized and beaten; women skinned; women murdered while having sex or in the making of snuff films, women tortured as they try to protect their children, girls murdered during sex.

For me, the constant delving into the world of rape and sex trafficking, of women treated as object, not subject, creates an atmosphere of depression and anomie, not empowerment. It's as if, despite the many social changes of the last forty-five years, we still don't know, as Germaine Greer wrote in her 1999 *The Whole Woman*, how much men hate women. Nor do we women know how much we've internalized that hatred.

The Irish psychiatrist Anthony Clare agreed in response to Greer in his 2000 *On Men*, saying, "We [men] fear women, hate them, marginalize them, denigrate them...and...strive to control and dominate them." In the crime novel, that hatred and fear get played out in rape and obliteration of the female.

At the same time that writers are bringing graphic rape, dismemberment, snuff films and human trafficking into myriad crime novels, they are also subjecting their female heroes to abuse.

Detectives like V.I. came to life in a time of bravado, when my peers and I were pushing the boundaries of what women could be and do. We wrote out of a kind of cockiness: we're doing a job because we want it, we like the work, no one can stop us.

Today, the female hero often has been brutally assaulted herself, as is the case with Lisbeth Salander, or suffered some other form of serious trauma. For some writers and readers, the only acceptable reason for a woman to embrace the investigative life is to recover from damage, or get revenge for it—not because she takes pleasure in the work, and comes to it as a free spirit.

Women fighting crime are also often small. Lisbeth Salander is the tiniest: she's five feet tall, weighs 88 pounds, and doesn't have noticeable breasts or hips. She looks like a doll, not a woman. Imagine her as five-foot eight, with a G-cup and weighing 160 pounds. As the boy-girl, the rape endurer, we can feel a certain patronizing protectiveness toward her. If she took up room, had a woman's mature body, we might turn away from her. One of the great tours de force in recent crime fiction is Liza Cody's 1995 *Bucket Nut.* Her protagonist, Eva Wylie, is that large woman, survivor of abuse similar to Lisbeth Salander's, but her size puts us off. It's Cody's great gift as a writer that she forces us to empathize with this most unempathic heroine.

In the world of entertainment, including film and video games, violence against women isn't limited to the page or screen. In 2014, when Anita Sarkeesian posted an online video series analyzing the way women are presented as rape and murder targets in video games, she received over ten thousand death and rape threats in one day. These included posting her

home address, phone number, and email accounts as well as those of her parents so that assailants could target her in person. The threats—labeled GamerGate--included detailed descriptions of how to assault her with hot tire irons before murdering her.

GamerGate came *not* because Sarkeesian called for censorship, nor because she urged her readers to assault gamers who enjoy rape scenes. They came because Sarkeesian was *reporting* on the industry. The attacks are notable partly because it underscores how vested parts of our society are in demeaning and reifying women.

The attacks also parallel the way in which abortion providers are routinely targeted online: abortion opponents post providers' home addresses and phone numbers, put their pictures on websites with bulls' eyes over their faces (next to photographs of murdered doctors like Dr. Tiller), and send death threats not just to the doctors and nurses, but to their children. Women who have abortions also often receive threatening phone calls and emails.

Women taking up public space in anything other than the role of servant, whore or victim, women claiming active agency for their lives seems to create such a gigantic narcissistic wound in some breasts that only violent destruction of the female can ameliorate it.

Women wanting to act as their own and sole moral agents in making reproductive decisions are claiming their bodies for themselves, taking them out of the realm of object and making themselves subjects. This is apparently experienced as a potent attack, deserving of punishment.

I experienced a mild version of this reaction after I started Sisters in Crime, a group which advocates for women in the crime writing world. We began modestly in 1986, concerned by the fact that crime novels by men were seven times more likely to be reviewed than those by women. This statistic meant that women writers were far more likely than men to have short careers, because libraries—still today the main purchasers of crime fiction—wouldn't buy a book without at least two reviews in a nationally juried publication.

As soon as Sisters began gaining traction, we came in for attack in the fanzines of that era. Writers claimed we were advocating censorship and trying to remove men from the crime fiction world. I got an anonymous letter telling me rape would shut me up—but that was one letter, not ten thousand death threats.

In 1992, the Chicago *Tribune*—then the most important newspaper in the Great Lakes region—published an attack on me and Sisters by Bill Brashler, who was both a reporter and a crime writer.

Brashler claimed my goal was to get rid of books by men. To underscore how dangerous I was, he attacked my appearance—I was "ominously" dressed all in black; I had "a pointed nose and eyes that cut and slash." I sounded like a cross between the stereotype of the predatory Jew in *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* and the Wicked Witch of the West. All because I advocated for women to have a seat at the big table.

Early in Sisters' existence, in 1988, I proposed that we study how women actually are depicted in crime fiction. Cornell University's sociology department had offered to create a worksheet for us and to tabulate the results if members of Sisters in Crime would read the books and mark the worksheets. The membership voted almost unanimously against this. The women were afraid that they would all come in for the kind of abuse that was flowing my way, that they would lose readers and publishers. All I wanted was data so I could see what was going on, and raise awareness about it, but that was translated into, "Paretsky wants to censor books by men and remove them from the shelves."

It's a baffling conundrum: sadism against women is protected speech, but women who protest it are violating the First Amendment and should shut up.

This reaction to my words, or the gamer universe's reaction to Sarkeesian's words, or the massive and successful American effort to remove women's ability to control their own bodies, made me think seriously about V.I.'s role. When I got the letter from the woman who thought V.I. should be punished for talking back to men, and read it in the context of what was happening to women's bodies in fiction and in the political arena, I realized that V.I.'s main function was to speak.

It's true that my detective is physical—she is sometimes criticized for being too physical, for courting danger and taking her lumps. Her main function, though, is to speak, to say those things that people in power want to keep unsaid, unheard. Her job is to advocate for those on the margins. It is her speech that unleashes a physical reaction against her: she does not provoke the powerful because she's assaulted them physically. She arouses their fury, as I did, as Sarkeesian does, by speaking when they want her to be quiet.

Geena Davis, concerned about the way women are depicted on television and film, worked with the Annenberg Foundation to do some basic research on women on screen. In a 2010 report, the Foundation found that in 1970, women spoke 28 percent of the lines in movies. In 2010, women spoke about 28 percent of the lines. In other words, in a forty year period, where women became astronauts and Supreme Court

judges, there has been no change in the amount of speech women are allowed.

We've come a great distance along some roads since 1982, but on other roads, we are still at the beginning of our journey. What heartens me is that public figures like Geena Davis are starting to think about the roadblocks and to take action against them. I'm also heartened by the great numbers of women solving problems in fiction and in television—even if the average female TV investigator is so thin her breastbone juts out above her low-cut top.

In the meantime, in my own work, I will not let V.I. be a victim. She will be attacked because the physical is an automatic extension in our world of the fear of women's agency. She will not fall, though, and she will never stop talking back.

CHAPTER TWO

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SARA PARETSKY: FEMINISM AND THE FEMALE DETECTIVE IN MAUD TABACHNIK'S CRIME NOVELS[1]

ANDREA HYNYNEN

Introduction

"Women can be detectives, and I am one", Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski adamantly proclaims in *Hard Time*, as she hears a young girl explain to her friend that "women can't be detectives, don't be a fool, Sarina" (Paretsky 1999, 45). Sara Paretsky demonstrated with this character that competent female detectives do exist, and the continuing success of her Warshawski series proves that many readers agree (see Collado 2011, 227). In France, the attitude towards female investigators, and in particular female private detectives, is less affirmative. This applies to readers and authors alike. Several renowned female crime writers, like Fred Vargas and Dominique Manotti, still find it difficult to create convincing female main investigators, even if they self-define as feminists, as Manotti does. (Kimyongür 2013, 242). There are various reasons for this. Manotti points for instance to her long experience of political engagement in an almost exclusively male domain, whereas Vargas explains that it is easier to develop convincing male characters, since women are subjected to stereotypes to a much higher degree than men (see Hynynen 2013a).

[1] I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Dominique Jeannerod at Queen's University, Belfast (Northern Ireland), who encouraged me to write this article, and who supported me throughout the process. It would never have been written without his input and valuable comments.

Among the rather few French women crime writers who have created a recurring female principle investigator, including Andréa Japp, Dominique Sylvain and Brigitte Aubert, one is particularly noteworthy, namely Maud Tabachnik. Her name is mentioned whenever a scholar writes about French crime fiction written by women (see Noreiko 1999; Brasleret 2000; Desnain 2001; Décuré 2000, 2009; Tabachnik 2005a; Barfoot 2007; Lopéz 2009; Delestré 2011; Kimyongür 2013; Hynynen 2013b). More importantly, seeing that female writer obviously does not equal feminist writer, Tabachnik, who created the first serial lesbian detective in France, is commonly presented as the prime example of feminist crime fiction in France. Tabachnik wrote her first novel *La vie à fleur de terre* (Life at ground surface) in 1990, but it was *Un été pourri* (A Rotten summer), which introduced the lesbian investigating journalist Sandra Kahn, that established her reputation. Published in 1994, this provocative novel is a kind of rape revenge story set in Boston, where a number of men get killed and mutilated by women. Sandra Kahn is a suspect and guilty of one of the murders, but Inspector Sam Goodman lets her off the hook, because he understands her motivations for killing the sexual predator who had raped, tortured and killed her girlfriend a year earlier. Sandra Kahn becomes an investigator in the following novels. *Un été pourri* sparked outrage and Tabachnik was accused of being a man-hater for depicting women who murder and emasculate men. (Tabachnik 1997a, 125).[2] What sets Tabachnik apart is her overt display of feminism within as well as outside of her fiction.

This chapter is organized around three lines of enquiry. I will begin by giving a brief overview of the situation of female and feminist crime fiction in France in relation to America. This will be followed by a discussion on Sara Paretsky's and Maud Tabachnik's feminist engagements. The third part of the article is devoted to the female investigators V.I. Warshawski and Sandra Kahn and looks more closely into each author's ways of approaching some themes that are essential to feminist crime

[2] Tabachnik's *Un été pourri* brings Helen Zahavi's notorious rape revenge story *Dirty Weekend* (1991) to mind. The French translation *Dirty Week-End* was published in 1992. Considering the massive scandal Zahavi's book brought about, it seems likely that Tabachnik knew about it. The similarities between the two titles – *Dirty Weekend* versus "A Rotten Summer" (*Un été pourri*) – would also suggest that, even though there are no definite proofs of it. Tabachnik's *L'Ordre et le chaos* (2014) offers quite a different version of the rape revenge story. The main character is not an intentional avenger, but she accidentally kills male offenders as she tries to defend their victims.

fiction and that intersect with gender, namely cultural and ethnical identity, class and violence.[3]

America as a role-model for feminism

The Franco-American intercultural connections are substantial and French writers of crime fiction have found inspiration and models from across the Atlantic for a long time (see Gorrara 2003).[4] The feminist turn in the crime genre, initiated by Sara Paretsky and her likes, seems, however, to have been less influential. American feminism is, in fact, often met with skepticism in France. Véronique Desnain's (2001, 184-185) study on female crime writers in France reveals that many authors dislike what they consider to be the American model of the omnipotent female detective, that which V.I. Warshawski represents. Such idealistic and surreal wonder-women do not match the realistic posture associated with the crime genre in France.

Since the main character's gender is but one possible marker of feminism, other aspects should to be taken into account if we wish to grasp the state of feminism in French crime fiction. Significantly, all of the female writers interviewed by Desnain (2001, 174) maintained that their auctorial position was not dependent on their gender. They clearly rejected the idea of any female specificity influencing their writing. This is obviously a reaction against the often condescending and simplistic label *polar féminin*, which has been used by many (male) critics since the late 1990s to lump together all female crime writers into a single group without considering their individual talent or style (Levet 2008; see also Kimyongür 2013). In my opinion, another possible explanation can be found in France's republican universalist ideology, which abhors "ghettoization" and "communalism", and in the authority which is still associated with the figure of the writer as an artist. Andrea Oberhuer (2011, 198) suggests that French literature in particular is a bastion of universalism. When French women crime writers insist on their own singularity, they may inadvertently be trying to enhance their status in distancing themselves from the less respectable notions of genre writer, or feminist writer. As a consequence, they implicitly deny the need for female solidarity. Many writers object to the label of feminist. Whatever

[3] For a discussion of the concept "intersectionality", coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, see e.g. Dorlin 2008, 79-88.

[4] American models of hard-boiled crime fiction were imported massively to France in the aftermath of WWII. Their wide distribution was advanced by Gallimard's *Série Noire*, launched by Marcel Duhamel in 1945. (Gorrara 2003).

their reasons, there is no French equivalent to the American *Sisters in Crime* organization, whose specific aim is to support women writers and to promote female, or feminist, crime fiction.

Sociologist Éric Fassin (2009, 13), who is specialized in gender and sexuality studies from a transatlantic perspective, explains that "America" has become a rhetorical figure in French public discourse. This imaginary construct is entrenched in French culture and has considerable impact on how American sexual politics and feminism are perceived. Although many people are highly critical of American minority politics and feminism(s), America is viewed by others as the supreme forerunner in matters of gender equality and women's issues. Accordingly, French feminist-minded crime fiction scholars and writers tend to look to American crime fiction for inspiration. Nicole Décuré's forceful article on American feminist crime fiction, "Pleins feux sur les limières anglo-américaines: 30 ans de féminisme, 15 ans de polar", is a case in point. The article, which appeared in 1997 in a special issue on the *roman noir* of the prestigious journal *Les Temps Modernes*, gives an overview of the most prominent American and British feminist crime writers and highlights how these have succeeded in transforming the genre. Sara Paretsky is specifically mentioned. (Décuré 1997; see also Décuré 2000). In the same issue, Maud Tabachnik published a polemic essay on the no-place for women in the *roman noir*, where she vehemently accused writers and critics of neglecting and despising women. She argued that women were only present in the *noir* genre as victims, as faulty *femmes fatales* who ensnare the poor male hero, or as the insignificant, kind and loyal blond secretary who supports her beloved hero in the vain hope that he might notice her and marry her (Tabachnik 1997a, 122-123). The juxtaposition of these writings in the same volume positioned America as a haven for feminist crime fiction as opposed to the conservative and androcentric situation prevailing in France.

Tabachnik subscribes to this view of America as a role-model for feminism. In the above mentioned essay, she makes a short remark about American female writers having finally introduced a new kind of heroic female characters in the 1980s and the 1990s (1997a, 124). In 2000, Tabachnik attended a seminar on feminism and crime fiction organized by the French national association for feminist studies (ANEF). She categorically stated, in the discussion following her presentation, that the Americans were the first to change women's destiny and that she deplored the pervasive anti-Americanism found in France (Tabachnik 2000a, 76). Tabachnik sets most of her novels in the United States and all of her serial detectives are American. Interestingly, Tabachnik is labeled the most

American crime writer in France on the dust jacket of her recent novel *L'Ordre et le chaos* (2014), an editorial strategy which indicates that this author does not fit with the generally acknowledged image of French crime writers. Tabachnik's American detectives, as well as her preference for American locations in most of the novels undeniably support the promotion of such a public image, as does her choice of sub-genres: thriller and hardboiled.[5] In regard to this epithet, her detectives' assertive feminism may, nonetheless, be equally important as their national identity and the setting. The same characteristic also explains her exceptional place in France.

Tabachnik cites no names when she talks about American feminism, so she never explicitly posits Paretsky as her personal role-model, but other writings on this subject indicate that Paretsky is widely recognized, in France, to be one of the main advocates of feminist crime fiction (see e.g. Décuré 1997; Mesplède 1997; Basch quoted in Tabachnik 2000a, 76; Collado 2011). Besides, regardless of whether Tabachnik has actually read Paretsky's books or not, these two writers share many features that are worth exploring: a feminist agenda, a remarkable female detective, a special interest in Jewishness and memories of the Holocaust, and the status as a feminist icon in crime fiction.

Paretsky's and Tabachnik's feminist engagements

Tabachnik could be seen as following in the footsteps of Sara Paretsky, since each author is a pioneer in feminist crime writing in her own cultural context. Sara Paretsky began to write in the 1980s, whereas Tabachnik, almost ten years her senior, turned to writing approximately a decade later, leaving a long career in physiotherapy behind her. Paretsky (2007, 77) comments upon her feminism in the autobiographical *Writing in An Age of Silence*: "Feminism was a fad, it had its moment, it's gone, let's do gangster rap now. But I am still doing feminism and so is my detective V.I. Warshawski. We are both dogged, even if we can't keep up with modern fashions." The author lends her continuous feminist commitment to her protagonist with whom she identifies on this point. Paretsky's engagement also initiated *Sisters in Crime*, that she founded in 1986.

Both Paretsky and Tabachnik set out to confront sexist and misogynistic attitudes when they started to write crime fiction. This ambition pervades

[5] Maud Tabachnik defines herself as a writer of *romans noirs*. (See e.g. Tabachnik 2000, 71). This is a very diverse category in France today, but one of its main characteristic is social criticism and some kind of political engagement.

the novels, and it is exposed in interviews and paratexts and through other activities. Paretsky's official website cites a quote from the *New York Times Book Review* where the author says: "I always had trouble with the way women are treated as either tramps or helpless victims who stand around weeping. I wanted to read about a woman who could solve her own problems."[6] Tabachnik believes that women lack positive role models, which is why she wanted to create strong, independent female characters who stand up against injustice and fight back (Tabachnik 2000a, 73). Desnain (2001, 185) underlines the French author's membership in the feminist movement 'Chiennes de garde', whose objective is to defend women's dignity by reacting on symbolic sexual violence, sexist comments and insults made in public. Although Tabachnik has not channeled her engagement into a collective movement such as *Sisters in Crime*, her strident essay on the discrimination of women in the *noir* genre was taking a stand in a way that no other writer had done before.

Tabachnik's feminist stance is explicated in the epigraph of her novel *J'ai regardé le diable en face* (I have looked into the eyes of the devil), published in 2005 and set in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico. It deals with the infamous feminicide occurring in the area. In the novel, Sandra Kahn is commissioned by her journal the *San Francisco Chronicle* to write a story about them. Tabachnik (2005b, 7. My translation) declares in the epigraph that she wrote the book in a fit of rage, because "In Mexico, as everywhere else on the planet, women die because they were born women." Sociologist Jules Falquet (2014) stresses that analyses of these murders should take into account that they emerge from a complex web of sexism, patriarchy, racism, colonial history, material conditions and neo-liberal politics, but Tabachnik approaches them merely as an extreme incarnation of the patriarchy and misogyny that haunt the entire globe. Writing a crime novel was her way of alerting the world to this barbaric injustice.

Tabachnik has a more aggressive feminist output than Paretsky. Paretsky promotes women, defends female sexuality and agency, and condemns sexism, but she does not reject men altogether. In particular, Paretsky denounces hypocritical moralism that judges women's moral character on the sole basis of their sexual behavior, expecting them to be chaste and married, while setting different standards for men. (Paretsky 2007, 60-61). Although Warshawski guards her independence, she engages in various close relationships with men throughout the series. Tabachnik, on the other hand, displays a pessimistic view on relations between men and women. This writer has declared that men hate women

[6] http://www.saraparetsky.com/books/novels/killing-orders/