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Eve's Encounters with Evil

ABSTRACT

A key focus of this article is to reflect on the conundrum that while writers of crime are at present evenly matched in gender, there is evidence of a worldwide dominance of female, especially middle class and middle aged, readers of this genre. Women, especially of baby boomer age, make up the bulk of buyers (bowker.com). This should be surprising considering the often graphic nature of the content of crime books and the article asks whether there might be an ethical or beneficial aspect to the popularity of the genre, for both the readers and writers. By Eve I refer to the first Biblical reported crime, where the woman is victim and blamed as author. Now that sin and death are synonymous with the crime story, how evil is Eve the writer? And is Eve the reader made more evil by reading about crime? The discussion will refer to Ngaio Marsh, crime writer and also report findings from focus groups held with book club members in New Zealand in 2011 and 2012.

KEYWORDS

crime fiction
Ngaio Marsh
readers
women
writers

INTRODUCTION

It is a fact universally acknowledged by booksellers that crime does pay in the book world (Blundell 2011) and it is now common to be able to attend a session featuring at least one crime writer at any book festival. Yet the genre is usually only 'treated' in an academic manner as a feature of popular culture or media. Although non-fiction sales far exceed those of fiction writing, boosted by education titles, tourism and television shows, of the fiction categories, the sales of crime novels exceed those of romance, science fiction and literary works. In New Zealand where worldwide trends of women as dominant book buyers are followed, crime fiction sales comprise thirty per cent of the fiction sales (Nielsen Book Scan

2013) - a sizeable segment, 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 consistently 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 women, often medically or legally trained, such as Tess Gerritson and Kathy Reichs, wish to write crime fiction? Or women from all professions and trades choose to read it? Is 'Reader, I murdered him' a likely development in the genre as a new romance and crime hybrid? Considering the unpleasant nature of the content and behaviours in the genre, and its popularity with women writers and readers especially, including this author, this article will attempt to reflect on whether there is a beneficial, even ethical, dimension to crime fiction. This will be examined from the point of view of both writers and readers, especially educated professional women, by using references to interviews, blogs and books about and by selected writers, as well as responses from a series of focus groups with book club members in New Zealand, conducted in 2011 and 2012. The work of Ngaio Marsh, New Zealand's best known writer of 'teckery' as she called it (Drayton 2008: 5), will be used as a case study in this argument in defence of crime fiction as ethical writing, driven by moral imperatives for Eve the writer and in many cases, Eve the reader.

THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR WRITERS

Most authors usually admit to working within an ethical framework, aware of matters of correct behaviour, the rule of law, honesty and fair treatment. More specifically, writers can themselves be judged on issues of plagiarism, accuracy, hoax and fraud. On an even more detailed level they can be scrutinized over matters of factual correctness, historical and geographical reference, appropriation, representation and even pseudonym and identity. When considering the content of their writing, writers often have to defend the decision made to include violent crime or scenes of abuse or torture. While such elements are key factors in the rejection of the genre by many readers, some of these concerns have naturally been raised by contemporary women crime writers. For example, in an 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).

As well as her admission of the financial imperative for her work to sell to readers, Gerritsen suggests a more primal instinct is driving book sales: 'It's also the fear of the unknown; we want to be frightened by them' (Gerritsen Radio NZ). She goes on to note the way that at her local aquarium, she sees the bulk of children clustered around the shark tank, and identifies a desire to recognize threats, to learn to survive and to be aware of the enemy. She adds that she believes readers also want to identify with the victims. This last idea is certainly worth considering, given the recent popularity of books such as *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold 2001) and *Afterwards* (Lupton 2011) in which the narrative voice is that of a victim of crime, which could be paraphrased, 'Reader, I was murdered by him.'

THE HISTORICAL POPULARITY OF CRIME FICTION

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 argues that the sleuth should investigate a murder committed within a closed and closely related community, so that all the characters are suspects. Auden recommended the use of maps and timetables, and he favoured a prosperous setting. One in which:

[t]he country is preferable to the town, 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. (1948)

Auden compared detective fiction to Greek tragedy in its formulaic pattern rising to climax ('concealment, manifestation, revelation, catharsis') and said that:

[m]urder 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. (1948)

If we are surprised at the popularity of the genre by 1948, let us note that by 1929 the genre of crime fiction was already so popular in Britain that Ronald Knox, one of its practitioners, wrote a list of *Rules of Fair Play*. Included were injunctions that the criminal must be

introduced early in the story, there was to be no more than one secret passage or room, no clues were to be suddenly produced and that the detective should not be the criminal (Knox 1929).

This must surely be a criticism of Agatha Christie, one of the first crime writers to write successfully from the perspective of the murderer. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) was 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 ending, Christie reveals that the murderer is the narrator, thereby ‘usurping the authority of the narrator’ (Munt 1994: 8). This early playfulness with the genre where plot twists are not expected to be driven by the narrator’s voice is an indication of the rules of the game inherent in the genre of crime fiction. This approach to crime writing as a game moves my focus to an earlier period of crime and detection novels when problem solving and puzzles were seen as a beneficial distraction.

THE FOUR QUEENS OF CRIME AND INTERACTIVE GAMES

Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh were the four great female crime writers from the Golden Age of detective novels, 1920-1940; four Eves in the Garden, writing in a genre which, having been explored by Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and, to an extent, Charles Dickens in the nineteenth century, quickly became popular after Arthur Conan Doyle created his great character Sherlock Holmes. 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 invention in *Murder at the Vicarage* in 1930, introducing the elderly, wise, curious and ostensibly insignificant Miss Marple as her sleuth. The ‘Queens of Crime’ preferred the styles of ‘cosy’, ‘manor’ and ‘locked room’ (Franks 2012) mystery, although to many modern, explicit tastes which tend to prefer the influences from the ‘hardboiled’ school, they seem dated and fusty in style. However, as Auden’s essay indicates, they were working within a game with rules.

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 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)

It is easy now to underestimate the importance of these games for social occasions in the early twentieth century. Although it was invented early in that century, television was not commercialized 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. Jigsaw puzzles, which also arose in popularity as a result of being map based in the eighteenth century, were image based by the early twentieth century (Williams 1990) and 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. As Auden comments:

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. (1948)

As well as riddle and puzzle solving, crime detection offers reassurance in the formula of cause, effect, red herring, revelation, all of which makes it so entertaining. Arising as they do out of a time of social and political upheaval, these novels offered embittered or disappointed readers opportunities to let justice prevail and 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 both evidence and agents of social change.

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 with justice and rectitude while not giving too much detail about their particular perverted proclivities. At the same time the women writers 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 modernization for women’s roles, providing women with greater work and leisure opportunities’ (Munt 1994: 12). In fact, they were able to usurp the masculinity of the genre with generally foppish, aristocratic detectives. However, the formulaic and conservative nature of detective fiction validates a clearly structured society.

NGAIO MARSH’S INNOVATIONS

Ngaio Marsh has been credited with creating one of the first professional police detectives 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.

In the case of Ngaio Marsh’s novels, Roderick Alleyn acquired a wife; an independent, liberal-leaning, ‘blue-stockings’ 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, but she is also his intellectual match; at times a sounding board, at others a severe critic of the British judiciary. Alleyn is the only long-married detective of the creations of the Queens of Crime.

A 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. Marsh seemed particularly interested in exposing those who exploited the emotional and spiritual weakness of others. 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 ‘[d]amn, sickly, bogus, mumbo, jumbo’ (Marsh 2009: 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 2008: 67)

Despite her agnosticism, Marsh had strong beliefs in the role of culture in society in developing and enhancing ethical and moral values, including those from the Maori culture of

her homeland. 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. By 1928, when she made her first visit to England to visit flamboyant upper class friends she had made in New Zealand (whom she fictionalized 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 (Wattie 1998). Her decision to write crime novels in her late thirties while on one of her long visits to Britain was not taken seriously in New Zealand until much later, even though that was the most popular form of fiction at the time in the English-speaking world. Like two other great New Zealand writers, Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame, she achieved a living from her writing and 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' (1966: 94).

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 48 plays. Of those, 25 were by Shakespeare, and of these, only two were comedies; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* (although there were at least two productions of each) (Drayton 2008: 294, 5). In New Zealand she was most renowned for her theatre work in high culture, while she was also admitted into the pantheon of crime writing abroad. Yet there is a strong moral crossover 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.

Marsh, our 'case study' Eve the writer, was noted by her peers and fans for the imaginative deaths she devised for her victims, boiling in mud pools and stuffing into wool presses being two 'Kiwi' examples. Marsh published over thirty crime titles, among other writings, and of these only four are set in New Zealand, although elements of 'home' appear regularly - a Maori war club or *mere* on a hunter's wall and a visiting New Zealander becomes an incidental witness. Using Alleyn's outsider position to investigate *makutu* (spells), she has him instructed in *marae* (meeting house) procedure and the spirit world by a tribal elder in *Colour Scheme* (1947). As a white New Zealander in a postcolonial world and

a flamboyantly Anglophile one at that, she alludes to Maori beliefs and practices as exotic, with an outsider's gaze. Alleyn possibly stands as 'the first bicultural detective' (Drayton 2008: 245).

Marsh famously made few comments on her own writing and motivations apart from a need to earn a living; however, interestingly she did comment on the importance of accurate research for her writing in her 1966 memoir, *Black Beech and Honeydew* (1966: 149).

EVE, THE READER: FOCUS GROUPS

Having looked in more detail at a writing Eve, let us now turn to another face of Eve, that of the reader. This leads to further consideration of the relationship between crime fiction and ethics or the concept of 'cultural citizenship' (Hermes 2007). Having mentioned the idea of social structures as endorsed by crime fiction, we can now ask whether contemporary readers and writers are made more responsible for reading or creating it.

In a survey of book club members and crime fiction readers in New Zealand conducted during August 2011 and January 2012 (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 respondents 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 ongoing 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 and kept them interested.

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' (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' (Focus Group 2). 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' (Focus Group 1).

Several readers in the focus groups reflected further on the ethical impact of crime writing: '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' (Focus Groups 2, 3).

CONCLUSION

In a collection of essays discussing Aristotle's *Ethics* and society, Sandrine Berges says that '[t]he 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' (*Values and Virtues* 2006: 212). One effect of crime stories is that they reveal evil in society to those whose lives are comfortable and predictable, and give them empowering insights. Another is that they offer resolution against the abject, the violence and horror of the encounters with evil reported daily in the media, but ultimately affirm our humanity and 'being' by giving us a moment of entertainment in which to feel fully alive:

The crime novel, in trying to figure out what happened, is deeply comforting because the novel, the police work, the investigation, will (in the most fundamental way) take this moment of death, this terrible end-of-time, back into science, into art, into representation, into time. *We are* alive – we must be, we're reading (Orford 2010: 191).

In this way both Eve the writer and Eve the reader are victim, observer and Godlike Fates.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Pittaway, G. (2014), 'Eve's Encounters with Evil', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 5th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand*

(PopCAANZ), Hobart, Australia, 18-20 June, 2014, P. Mountfort (ed.), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp. 76-87. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2014/>.