

BREAKING THE FORMULA:
POLITICS AND SEXUALITY IN LESBIAN DETECTIVE FICTION

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Meredith A. Wood

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Meryl Altman



Robert Gross



Bruce McConachie

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the popularity of the literary genre of lesbian detective fiction and examines the degree to which it functions as a cultural tool representing the values and beliefs of the group in which it is produced.

Lesbian detective fiction is one of the fastest growing literary genres in the United States. It is produced and distributed through a network of small, independent, lesbian publishing companies and sold in lesbian and gay bookstores.

Lesbian detective fiction maintains the essential elements of traditional detective "formula" fiction--crime, motive, chase, and resolution--but often alters their representations to appeal to a specific audience of lesbian readers.

The author surveyed a small group of regular readers of lesbian detective fiction. Their responses indicate that they enjoy the fiction for many different reasons: they identify with the actions and feelings of the lesbian detective, they enjoy the process of unraveling a mystery, and they like seeing political issues relevant to their lifestyle addressed in literature.

It is the conclusion of this study that lesbian detective fiction functions both as a form of popular entertainment and as a cultural index that has the power both to reflect and to affect the lives of many of its lesbian readers.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most often overlooked consequences of the civil rights struggle of the 1960s has been the development of a powerful lesbian and gay rights movement in the United States. What began as a three-day series of riots outside the New York City gay bar The Stonewall Inn on a hot June night in 1969 has evolved into an influential lesbian and gay liberation movement with hundreds of grass-roots organizations throughout the country. For many gay men and lesbians, life has changed dramatically in the 21 years since "Stonewall" and can be characterized by the increased acceptance and visibility of their homosexual "lifestyle." There are currently 50 openly gay elected officials in the United States, an increase of 1000% since 1980.¹ Newsweek magazine's March 12, 1990 cover story, "The Future of Gay America," reported that the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a gay lobbying group, was the ninth largest independent political action coalition during the 1988 presidential election, and it was 25th on the Federal Election Commissions' list of fund raisers. The article concludes that "politicians have come to recognize the implications of the rise of an openly gay middle class--vast numbers of educated, articulate gays who can and do vote."²

And yet many barriers remain that inhibit equality for the estimated 22 million lesbian and gay Americans. Only two states, Wisconsin and Massachusetts, have laws protecting the civil rights of lesbians and gay men, and twenty-four states maintain heterosexist, outdated, and difficult-to-enforce sodomy laws.³ Faced with such a difficult and contradictory existence, many gay and lesbian communities have developed networks of social support services, including political action groups, health care providers, social organizations, and, increasingly, informative lesbian and gay publications.

Lesbian and gay themes in literature are not unusual, but what is new is the successful marketing and increased popularity of books created by and for lesbians and gay men. With the increased acceptance and political influence of homosexuality in the past decade has come a degree of economic prosperity, which has allowed many lesbians and gay men to establish businesses catering specifically to the needs of the lesbian and gay community. Although this is especially true in urban areas with large gay populations, some industries have been able to operate on the national and occasionally international level. Since the 1970s a network of lesbian publishing companies and booksellers has developed that has been able to successfully anticipate and fulfill the literary tastes of many lesbian readers in the United States. Lesbian literature is one of the fastest

growing literary genres and the unusual subgenre of lesbian detective fiction accounts for a large part of this success.

I have defined lesbian detective fiction in this study as any type of literature that features a lesbian character engaged in the process of detection. She may be a police officer empowered by society to enforce its laws, a private investigator hired to administer a specific type of justice, or an amateur sleuth drawn into an investigation by circumstances beyond her control. In each case the lesbian detective is bound by specific conditions that govern both the resolution of the investigation and the method of detection itself. Although there are short stories featuring lesbian detectives, most lesbian detective fiction exists in novels.

Lesbian novels of detection are formulaic and follow one of two types of what John Cawelti has called the traditional "American adventure," the mystery and the detective formulas. In both, the protagonist's efforts are often frustrated by rigid social constraints, and in some instances, by physical violence. Lesbian detective novels that follow the traditional mystery formula are characterized by the existence of a crime, motive, chase, and resolution. The mystery formula acts much like a puzzle, and the guilty party is discovered only after all other suspects have been eliminated.

Lesbian detective novels that follow the traditional detective formula are similarly characterized by the

presence of a crime, motive, chase, and resolution. However, the guilty party in the detective formula, unlike the mystery formula, is usually revealed to be a group of complicit figures instead of one individual. This enables the detective in the novel to criticize institutional value systems and to question the authority of dominant social structures. The lesbian detective formula is most evident in works featuring private investigators and contributes to the atmosphere of extreme cynicism in the archetypical hard-boiled private eye. Although knowledge of the existence of formula is crucial to understanding the manner in which lesbian detective fiction functions, both effectively work as instruments of social criticism.

An investigation into the appeal and popularity of lesbian detective fiction is complex and intriguing because of the genre's seemingly diametrically opposed antecedents: the hard-boiled detective novel and lesbian-feminist literature. Detective fiction per se is a branch of the American adventure novel, whose professed tenets of rugged individualism and masculine initiative often consciously exclude women in the pursuit of the "American dream." The lesbian-feminist literary tradition developed in an attempt to create an inclusive ideology and approach to literature that recognizes contributions made by authors and critics outside the dominant white, heterosexual, patriarchal hegemony in the United States. Lesbian detective fiction is unique in that it not only reconciles such a problematic

alliance, but alters and enhances both traditions to meet the specific emotional and psychological needs of its lesbian readership. On one level it provides a much needed reaffirmation of the value of the frequently-persecuted homosexual lifestyle and on another more subtle level it fundamentally encourages a re-thinking and re-ordering of established social norms.

A study of the popularity of lesbian detective fiction is also important because the literature challenges the notion of formula fiction as the exclusive literary tool of the dominant patriarchy. Some critics feel that by adapting formulaic elements lesbian detective novels are helping to perpetuate the disenfranchisement of their audience,⁴ but a closer examination reveals that the novels also function on another level as a reclamation of the traditionally masculine genre of detective fiction by lesbian readers.

This thesis establishes the current popularity of the genre of lesbian detective fiction and links its appeal to both the specific lesbian-oriented circumstances of its publication and to the traditional success of detective and mystery fiction in the United States. It examines the role played by lesbian booksellers and reviewers in creating this success, and addresses the question of whether formulaic mystery and detective fiction are inherently patriarchal and anti-feminist. A small group of regular readers of lesbian detective fiction was surveyed and their responses provided insight into this unusual popular culture phenomenon.

It is difficult to arrive at one decisive reason of the recent popularity of the genre of lesbian detective fiction; it seems that the literature appeals to many different lesbians for a variety of reasons. For some readers the novels are totally unbelievable and provide a fantasy-like escape from the obligations of daily life; for others they are political tracts that promote the values and experiences of enviable and often identifiable lesbian characters. Ultimately what emerges from this study is a sense of a dialogue within the lesbian community that legitimizes a popular form of literature with roots in the dominant patriarchal culture but with enough independence to empower and entertain its lesbian audience.

NOTES FOR THE INTRODUCTION

1. Steven Laser, et al., "The Future of Gay America," Newsweek, 12 March 1990, 22.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kathleen Gregory Klein, The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1988), 201.

CHAPTER I

THE EVOLUTION OF THE LESBIAN PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Although they had long been present in French literature, lesbian themes did not appear in English or American fiction until the twentieth century.¹ Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness, Elizabeth Bowen's The Hotel, and Virginia Woolf's Orlando all enjoyed moderate success in England, while Gertrude Stein's Three Lives and Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour became popular in the United States. The "lesbian pulp novel" first emerged during the heyday of the mass-produced paperback in the 1950s, but the majority of lesbian fiction at the time was written by men and for men as soft-porn entertainment, a phenomenon credited to publisher Dick Carroll at Gold Medal (now Fawcett) Books. Those women who did attempt to portray lesbian life included Valerie Taylor [The Girls in 3B (1959), A World Without Men (1963)]; Marrison Zimmer Bradley [I am a Lesbian (1962), The Strange Woman (1962)]; and Ann Banon, whose 1957 Odd Girl Out, published by Fawcett-Gold Medal, became the second-best selling book in the country that year.²

The rise of a lesbian and gay rights movement in the late 1960s inspired a growing number of lesbian and gay publications. But lesbian writers faced special disadvantages reaching their audience. Most literature for

gay men gained ready access to large, trade publishing houses. By contrast, lesbians had to fashion a network of small publishers and independent bookstores. The "formal point of departure," according to Publisher's Weekly, came in the unlikely city of Omaha, Nebraska. There, with the founding of the Women in Print Movement in June 1976, the lesbian publishing industry was born. Dependent on new outlets for publication, lesbian literature necessarily developed "hand in hand with a larger social movement."³

The Omaha conference brought together over two hundred women active in publishing, printing, and bookselling, with the goal of establishing institutions devoted to the creation and distribution of women-oriented literature. Although homosexual orientation was not a prerequisite for attendance, the majority of women there were lesbians, a group the NOW-dominated feminist movement was attempting to discount. As Carol Sejay, co-founder of San Francisco's Old Wives' Tales Bookstore and publisher of "Feminist Bookstore News," recalls:

In 1976, we were pretty early in the women's movement; the people who first understood that the feminist movement had everything to do with them were lesbians. If you are unmarried, or how should I say, not in an joint earning arrangement with the higher-income earning sex, you understand the deep economic issue at the core of the women's movement. This, and the fact that lesbians weren't tied down to domestic servitude as straight women were, put lesbians at the forefront of early feminism. I mean, a couple hundred of us could spend a week in Omaha!⁴

The politicized lesbian "contingent" at the Women in Print conference ultimately laid the groundwork for the diverse

and successful lesbian publishing industry in the 1980s. Soon the "stapled and mimeographed pamphlets" initially sold to support women's centers became the "perfect-bound books sold in women's bookstores."⁵ Still, many publishing ventures were short-lived. Although the 1970s saw the establishment of several pioneer lesbian presses, including Shameless Hussey, Baltimore's Diana Press, The Women's Collective in San Francisco, and Daughters' Press in Plainfield, Vermont (the original publishers of Rita Mae Brown's enormously successful Rubyfruit Jungle), only The Naiad Press survived the decade.⁶

Part of Naiad's seventeen-year success lies in its "absolute embracement of the lesbian audience as the market to be cultivated."⁷ Accordingly to co-founder Barbara Grier: "Right from the beginning I said lesbian, lesbian all the way. I felt it was important to be clear about who we are and who we aim to please."⁸ Indeed in this regard Naiad Press recently adopted this slogan for use in their mailings: "Lesbians always know, if it's a book by Naiad Press, it's a book you want to own." Naiad was determined from the start to target a specific lesbian-only readership, and it was this foresight that together with experienced leadership (Grier had reviewed books for the pioneering lesbian journal "The Ladder" under the pseudonym Gene Damon),⁹ made the Tallahassee, Florida-based press one of the largest publishers of lesbian literature, including lesbian detective fiction.

Early successes at Naiad included Sarah Alridge's The Latecomer, which the author put up her retirement money to finance, and Jane Rule's Desert of the Heart. Alridge's book sold out its first printing of 2,000 copies; Rule's novel sold over 20,000 copies in three months and was later made into a motion picture.¹⁰ Rule's arrival at Naiad was important, recalls senior editor Katherine Forrest, because Rule had been published internationally and thus "conferred legitimacy to the press."¹¹ The publication of Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence proved to be an enormous financial boost. The fledgling Naiad began to attract a cross-over audience after the authors of the controversial book appeared on the popular Phil Donahue talkshow. Naiad's initial mailing list of 3,400 names now numbers 24,000, and the press has over 120 titles in print.¹²

In the past few years distinct genres have begun to emerge from the lesbian-feminist presses. Detective fiction has always been tremendously popular with both male and female readers. Allen Hibben's massive bibliography lists over 60,000 crime fiction titles.¹³ The origins of the genre date back centuries (some critics would argue to the Bible); the first widely available crime texts of the modern era were probably the works of Englishman James Catnach, who published the court records of murderers' confessions for thousands of readers in the early 1830s.¹⁴ The stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Allen Poe were also widely

read. In 1902 Doyle's The Hound of the Baskervilles became the first detective novel to appear on the best-seller lists, followed in 1909 by Mary Roberts Rhinehart's The Man in the Lower Ten.¹⁵ Eventually sales of Rhinehart's books (which were published at the rate of one a year throughout the 1920s) reached 300,000.¹⁶ Detective and mystery fiction enjoyed tremendous popularity in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, with the development of "sophisticated and polished publishing techniques" and a proliferation of cheap mystery magazines like Black Mask.¹⁷ Twenty-five percent of all new novels published in the United States during the 1930s were part of the broad genre of crime fiction, which included mysteries, detective novels, and espionage thrillers.¹⁸

Detective fiction is as popular today as during the Depression. A 1978 survey, reported in Publisher's Weekly, stated that 25% of all booksales in the United States were mysteries, and the novels continue to be prominent on most current best-seller lists. In 1965, when sales of one million paperbacks or 7500 hardcover copies were needed to reach the list, 151 detective novels qualified. By 1975, when the requirements for best-seller status were raised to two million paperback and 12,000 hardcover copies, 55 detective novels qualified. Overall, from 1895 to 1975 ten out of the top one hundred best-sellers were "crime" novels, with Mario Puzo's The Godfather at number one.¹⁹ The distinction of the all-time best-selling author belongs to

the "Grande Dame" of detective fiction, Agatha Christie, whose books had sold well over 500 million copies by 1979.²⁰ Statistics for the past decade are not yet available, but there is no indication that this trend is declining.

With the exception of the novels of P.D. James and Amanda Cross, detective novels written by women in the decades before the 1980s tended to be conservative and generally indistinguishable from those written by men. Recently, though, a significant number of women writing mystery and detective novels have begun to produce literature that features competent, independent women investigators, who achieve success through their own intelligence and hard work. Much critical attention has been given to this new "feminist" detective fiction, and some scholars are now attempting to address the seemingly incompatible alliance between feminism and detective fiction. Two notable works are Kathleen Gregory Klein's The Woman Detective (1988) and Maureen Reddy's Sisters in Crime (1988).²¹

Most feminist detective novels are produced by alternative presses with strong ties to the lesbian and feminist communities, and the novels can be characterized by their woman detective's feminist political beliefs and practices. In addition to publishing the adventures of lesbian detective Pam Nilsen, the Seal Press issues an International Women's Crime Series and has translated from

the Catalan Maria-Antonia Oliver's Study in Lilac (1986). Oliver's novel addresses the global significance of certain women's issues by contrasting the attitudes toward rape and abortion of the feminist detective and conservative Catalan society. Another mystery in the International Series, Elisabeth Bower's The Ladies Night (1988), offers a feminist perspective on child abuse and sexual abuse. In this novel the woman detective ultimately refuses to pursue the guilty individual because she fears for the safety of the main character.²²

The Crossing Press also publishes feminist detective fiction and its Womansleuth Mystery series has been successful in presenting women detectives in many non-traditional settings, including a mother-daughter team of investigators.²³ St. Martin's Press has published Susan Dunlap's Too Close to the Edge (1987), which features politically aware Berkeley, California Police detective Jill Smith. Both Bantam and Scribners have also recently released feminist detective novels.²⁴

Perhaps the most popular feminist detective characters to emerge in the 1980s are Sarah Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone. In her article "Women Sleuths in the '80s," Mary Lowry, a co-founder of New Words bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says of the two characters:

In Paretsky's latest novel, Blood Shot, V.I.'s relationships with women in the novel deepen in understanding and affection. Indeed V.I. has continued

to become a more interesting woman--and P.I.--in each new novel. Like V.I., Kinsey Milhone operates alone, has no permanent emotional attachment to men, and manages her life sparely and satisfyingly. Paretsky and Grafton have created unattached women living in solitary apartments where they are free to come and go at will, and have careers that enable them to move more freely, question freely, and bring to a satisfying conclusion puzzles that others cannot solve as quickly as they do.²⁵

Paretsky's character is especially interesting, and much attention has been given to V.I. Warshawski's controversial, "unfeminine" physical aggressiveness. Although some readers may be put off by Warshawski's actions, Paretsky sees such behavior as crucial to the portrayal of a feminist detective. In an interview with the feminist newsjournal Sojourner, Paretsky recalls:

I did get this one letter form a woman in Connecticut who was upset at the way V.I. talked back to men and didn't get beat up. V.I. is not perfect and people get pissed at her, and why shouldn't they? I wanted to create someone who was a real person, who wasn't a Miss Marple who always behaves herself. And I wanted to create a female character who could be sexual without being evil. You know in a lot of mysteries, that's how women are presented, either as virgins or whores. In so many mysteries written by men, the sexual women are evil or dangerous.²⁶

In addition to writing V.I. Warshawski detective novels, Paretsky is also active in Sisters in Crime, an organization of women interested in mysteries which she helped to create two years ago. The group is open to all writers, reviewers, readers, and editors of mystery fiction, and it has been successful in monitoring both the review process and award nominating system of the male-dominated Mystery Writers of America. Sisters in Crime has recently

begun to devote its attention to the portrayal of women characters in detective and mystery novels. The group is especially concerned with what it perceives to be an increase in incidents of sadism and violence against women in the novels.²⁷

The popularity of lesbian detective fiction parallels the recent success of feminist detective novels. Lesbian mystery and detective fiction represents one of the best-selling genres at the Naiad Press where five of twenty-four titles published in 1990 will be mysteries with printings of 12,000 copies each.²⁸ Perhaps the most successful author of lesbian detective fiction is Naiad's senior editor Katherine Forrest, whose books have a combined printing of 300,000 copies.²⁹ Among the most popular are her trio of Los Angeles Police Detective Kate Delafield novels: the first in the series, Amateur City, is in its second printing and has sold 35,000 copies; the second, Murder in the Nightwood Bar, also in its second printing, has sold 35,000 copies and was optioned in June of 1989 to Tom Hunter (The River's Edge) as a motion picture. Forrest's 1989 The Beverly Malibu, the latest of her trio, is Naiad's first hardcover, selling 9,000 of its initial 10,000 copies in the first month. In addition to being published in the United States, Forrest's books are published in England, and in translation in Holland, Germany, France, and Italy.³⁰

Other successful Naiad authors include Vicki McConnell, whose three "Nyla Wade" mysteries have sold a combined

40,000 copies with a fourth in the series due out soon, and Australian newcomer Clair McNab, who sold 25,000 copies of her first two Sydney Police Inspector "Carol Ashton" detective novels. McNab is also published in England, Australia, New Zealand, Holland, and Germany.³¹ Altogether Naiad serves 1380 bookstores directly, including approximately 200 which are gay and lesbian, and its publications are carried by all major American distributors.

Another publisher of popular lesbian detective fiction is Seattle's The Seal Press, which was founded in 1976 "to provide a forum for women writers and feminist issues,"³² but not with an exclusively lesbian target audience. Described as "feminist mysteries" on their covers, the "Pam Nilsen" lesbian detective novels by Seal co-founder Barbara Wilson are enormously popular. Despite having smaller printings than Naiad's (generally 5,000 copies each)³³ Wilson's books have reached many best-seller lists in the United States and England. The third in the series, 1989's The Dog Collar Murders, sold an unprecedented 8,000 copies between April and November. In England, where the book was published by Virago Books, it climbed to number one on the British newspaper The Independent's "alternative best-seller" list in only four weeks.³⁴ The Seal Press also enjoys success with many other fictional works: last year Madelyn Arnold's Bird Eyes received the first annual Lambda Literary Award for "best first lesbian novel" and was also nominated in the "best young adult novel" category.³⁵ The

Seal Press received an honor citation from the Publishers-Weekly-sponsored 46th annual Carey-Thomas Awards, whose goal is to honor the best examples of "creative publishing."³⁶

Unlike the somewhat more traditional detective novels published by the Naiad Press, Seal's Barbara Wilson novels are characterized by their highly politicized tone and story content. The Dog Collar Murders involves the brutal strangulation of a lesbian anti-pornography activist with a dog collar, a potentially difficult scenario because of the controversy over the legitimacy of a sado-masochistic/bondage and domination population within the lesbian community. Janey Mullaney, editor of the literary review Belles Lettres, sees the inclusion of such "political" issues as characteristic of much lesbian literature:

There are distinct genres that have emerged in the past few years, such as mysteries, SF and light romances. Although these genres are not particular to the lesbian/feminist authors, what is distinctive is the involvement with international issues and the promotion of powerful images of women.³⁷

Significantly, Wilson's two other Pam Nilsen mystery novels feature plots revolving around illegal aliens, American intervention in Central America, teenage runaways, and child abuse.

Crucial to Naiad, Seal, and the approximately three dozen other women's presses is the development of two relatively new wholesale distributors. Noting that many bookstores were buying "from Ingram or Baker & Taylor, to the exclusion of all else,"³⁸ David Wilk compiled and

established Womensource Catalogue through his Inland Books, listing new and backlisted titles from 40 women-owned presses. The compilation was then purchased by Ingram, and this has made books published by small presses more available to the general public; by having their titles included in Womensource smaller independent presses gain access to the Ingram microfiche, enabling virtually any bookstore to order them. In addition to Wilk's Inland Books, the Atlanta-based Golden-Lee Book Distributors has also compiled lists of gay and lesbian publications for its national distribution network and has published a separate catalogue geared to gay and lesbian bookstores.³⁹ These wholesalers have both resurrected old lesbian titles and promoted new ones, increasing the availability of lesbian literature today.

The unique interaction between the publishers and retailers of lesbian fiction also insures the literature's availability. As Sejay stated in her interview with Publishers Weekly:

No one will ever tell lesbian presses that their books don't sell anymore. We've created networks between booksellers and publishers, something the large houses don't have. We think its our business to be talking to each together all the time. A problem with mainstream publishers is that they publish what they think is salable. We know what is needed out there, and they know who will sell it. That's why, at least on lesbian issues, small presses will continue to be more successful than mainstream houses.⁴⁰

Lesbian literature has existed for centuries but it was not until the 1950s that it began to be specifically created

by lesbians for a lesbian audience in the United States. The lesbian publishing industry has developed since the 1960s to respond to the specific needs of the lesbian community and consists primarily of small, independent, women-owned and operated publishing companies and bookstores. Recently wholesalers have begun to backlist many lesbian titles making the books more available to a wider audience.

Lesbian literature per se is the fastest growing literary genre in the United States today,⁴¹ and the sale of lesbian detective fiction accounts for a large portion of this success. The development of a distinct genre of lesbian detective fiction can be traced back to the traditional popularity of crime fiction in the United States and England during the 1930s, and also the recent success of "feminist" detective and mystery novels. Lesbian detective fiction is unique in that it is specifically created by and for an often persecuted, socially disenfranchised audience. The lesbian publishing industry's political commitment to the women's community increases the appeal of the genre by promoting it in a non-discriminatory, positive manner that also reaffirms the value of the reader's sexual identity.

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1. Juana Ponce De Leon, "Gay and Lesbian Publishing, " Publishers Weekly, 8 December 1989: 15.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 16.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 16-17
9. Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been," in The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Barbara Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 203.
10. P.H. Hobbell, "Katherine Forrest - In Process," Lambda Rising Book Report, February/March 1989: 5.
11. Ibid.
12. Ponce De Leon, 18.
13. Kathleen Gregory Klein, The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 7.
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17. Robert A. Baker and Michael T. Nietzel, Private Eyes: One Hundred and One Knights (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985), 3.
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27. Ibid, 19.
28. Taken from the text of a letter from Barbara Grier, co-founder and editor of The Naiad Press. November 19, 1989.
29. Taken from the press release of Forrest's November, 1989 The Beverly Malibu promotional tour.
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34. The Independent, 28 October 1989, Book Review section.
35. Lambda Rising Book Report, June/July 1989, Special Cover section.
36. "Small Houses Sweep Carey-Thomas Awards," Publishers Weekly, 16 December 1989: 20.
37. Ponce De Leon, 22.
38. Juana Ponce De Leon, "Reflections on a Growing Market," Publishers Weekly, 8 December 1989: 24.
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41. Taken from text of a letter from Barbara Grier, November 19, 1989.

CHAPTER II

LESBIAN DETECTIVE NOVELS AND FORMULA FICTION

Many scholars and critics of detective fiction maintain that a popular detective or mystery novel is one that adheres to a specific "formula" or prescribed set of rules, governing what has traditionally been considered appropriate and acceptable plot and character development. Formulas existing within and establish the basis for the larger category of genre, which John Cawelti defines in his Adventure, Mystery, and Romance as "a literary class that views certain typical patterns in relation to their artistic limitations and potentials."¹ But while formula and genre can provide a useful framework for examining specific works of detective fiction, they are also problematic because of their inherent subjectivity. A critic's personal background can affect his or her opinion of a work's "artistic limitations and potentials," and such a judgment will thereby determine the work's legitimacy, value, and successful inclusion within a genre. As Cynthia Hamilton astutely recognizes in the introduction to her Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America:

The problem with this is that Cawelti has already made it clear that he is not thinking solely in terms of neutral definitional elements; he is using the concept of genre not simply as 'generalized descriptions of a number of individual works' (p.30) but as a set of artistic limitations and potentials. It is clear,

then, that his view of individual works will be hampered by expectations based on the lowest common denominator to be found.²

Hamilton's concern for Cawelti's "hierarchical notion of (popular) culture"³ is valid and must be kept in mind when considering the unique circumstances surrounding the creation and consumption of lesbian detective fiction. Lesbian detective fiction maintains the essential elements of Cawelti's detective formula--crime, motive, chase, and resolution--but often alters the traditional representation to meet the specific demands of its socially disenfranchised audience. In most lesbian detective novels this alteration does not weaken the effect of the formula; however, this change does make it necessary to examine the cultural function and increased popularity of lesbian detective fiction from more than one perspective.

Most lesbian detective fiction is based upon one or two formulas--the mystery formula or the detective formula--but before either one can be examined it is first necessary to understand how formulas function as powerful cultural tools: they can both reflect and affect the social values of their audience. Formula itself is essentially a set of conventional elements found in a large number of works,⁴ and the more often a formula is "repeated" the more likely it is to be perceived as correct or infallible. Formula fiction is a way of establishing and enforcing specific social norms in literature by promoting a central recurring theme or set of circumstances with which the reader is

familiar. As Steven Knight says in his Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction, it is formula texts that ultimately "create and justify what has come to be called hegemony, the inseparable bundle of political, cultural, and economic sanctions which maintain a particular social system to the advantage of certain members of the whole community."⁵

Formula critic Kathleen Gregory Klein extends Knight's analysis one step further in her book The Woman Detective. She argues that not only is formula fiction the exclusive literary tool of the dominant patriarchal culture, but that it is impossible to create a character within the detective formula who is a feminist; her very existence would be reinforcing a cultural instrument that promotes and maintains her own oppression. In the concluding chapter entitled "An Unsuitable Job for a Feminist?" Klein states:

Furthermore, the feminist detective who restores order to a disordered world by investigating murder may be serving justice, but although the justice may be personal, it is also public. Consequently, the feminist detective winds up supporting the existing system which oppresses women when she reestablishes the ordered status quo. This contradiction between feminist ideals and detectives' behavior is more apparent when the private eyes turn their criminals over to the law; however, no woman detective escapes the prospect of assisting in her own or other women's oppression whether women characters are the criminals, victims, or merely bystanders. Adapting the formula traps the authors.⁶

Klein's argument has much to recommend it, and a cursory glance at the functioning of the lesbian detective formula seems to confirm its basis in the traditional patriarchal detective formula.

The traditional detective formula is a subgenre of what Cawelti and others have identified as "the master formula" or the "American Adventure formula" and it incorporates familiar components of plot, setting, character, style, and theme. Crucial to the elements of the master formula are incidents of "lawlessness and the maxim opportunity for personal enrichment":

These two characteristics make the setting the best possible proving-ground for the individualistic values of the American ideology. The hero is the best man; he demonstrates what is possible for the individual to accomplish. The plot in which he is presented involves some form of the chase. The story is told using a colloquial style of narration, characterized by the literary imitation of everyday speech. The theme which permeates every aspect of the master formula is the primacy of the individual: he is seen to be the key unit of society.⁷

Both the detective formula and its counterpart, the mystery formula, promote the ideology of American individualism. While the detective in a typical mystery pursues a single guilty party, the formulaic plot of the detective novel is characterized by a widening circle of complicity. Within the detective fiction formula the most popular archetype is the hard-boiled detective or private eye. As David Geherin notes in his book The American Private Eye:

The genre offers the novelist an ideal opportunity to mirror his society. The private eye is a cultural middleman, a common man of uncommon virtue, on whose efforts are dedicated to pursuit of the noblest ideals of his society . . . also, because he is an outsider and normally lives alone, is not affiliated with any official law enforcement agency, and stubbornly clings to a rigorously personal code that is not shared by the majority of his country men the private eye is in an

excellent position to comment on the manners and morals of his society.⁸

And, because the lesbian detective is separated from mainstream society by her gender, sexual identity, and career choice, she is in an exceptionally good position to criticize society. In Mary Wing's She Came Too Late, lesbian investigator Emma Victor rarely misses an opportunity to use her irreverent humor to criticize the institutions that have become the cornerstones of many urban lesbian communities:

Everyone was there. The health services, the social services, our media, consisting of one small newspaper run by women overworked at their jobs, the women's radio station, in reality a few hours granted to women from an alternative left station itself on the brink of financial ruin, the battered women's shelter, always over-crowded and needing the most pathetic things, like silverware and sheets. Some social clubs were also present, coffeehouses for underage lesbians and a soup kitchen run by nuns who wore real clothes . . .⁹

In the traditional detective formula the male private eye is a socially marginalized figure, not unlike the criminal he is trying to catch. The private eye seeks "truth" and not legal justice because he recognizes that what the dominant society considers an acceptable punishment often differs from his own sense of ethics. As the investigation progresses, the private eye is usually angered but not shocked to learn that there is no one guilty individual, that many are complicit in the crime. Frequently the individual who pulled the trigger is the least blameworthy, having been driven to crime by economic necessity or other mitigating circumstances. The hard-

boiled detective formula goes far beyond the mystery formula in its capacity to act as a method of social criticism. Rather than lead its readers by the hand through the act of detection, the hard-boiled formula assaults readers with the brutal truth that their own value systems are as questionable as those of the various parties involved in the criminal investigation. This is also true of lesbian detective novels that follow the traditional detective formula. In She Came in a Flash, lesbian detective Emma Victor is disgusted by the lack of remorse shown by the murderer:

"What do you want me to say? That I killed him?" she sputtered.

"Say anything you want to. But you can hold the steam that's coming out under your collar. I can't have been the first person who's asked you that question."

"Who kills anybody when you're part of a drug tribe, Emma? You follow the same ritual over and over again. You do it with each other. You do it for yourself. and you get the same result every time: death."¹⁰

Ultimately, both the lesbian and the traditional detective formulas are dependent on what Cynthia Hamilton calls "the primacy of the individual as the key unit of society."¹¹ This is especially true in the case of the lesbian private investigator. As a solitary figure living by her own rules, the lesbian private eye is separated both from the dominant heterosexual society and from her own lesbian community. Consequently, she shares the traditional male private eye's disgust with the hypocrisy of the American Dream while experiencing her own anger at the

specific conditions of her own persecuted sexuality: homosexuality is illegal in twenty-four of the United States.¹² As Sarah Dreher's lesbian detective Stoner McTavish says of her existence:

It's always the same . . . Recriminations, anger, blame guilt, rejection -- all because we love the wrong people. In a world where school lunches are traded for nuclear warheads, and the air gives you emphysema, and the water gives you cancer. Where the FDA sets the "maximum allowable rat feces" per can of tuna. Where rapists walk the streets, free on probation, and you can drop a few coins in a slot and watch a movie of a Real Life woman being Real Life beaten to Real Life death for kicks and profit. Where we finally get a woman nominated for vice-president, the most innocuous office in the country, and all the woman-haters came screeching out from under their rocks to tap-dance on her coffin, and some of the woman-haters were women, and what does that say about how we're taught to see ourselves? . . .¹³

As Klein notices, the success of the lesbian private eye often depends on her ability to adapt the values and methods of the traditional private eye: both rely on their individualistic actions and attitude to apprehend the guilty party. Although the central theme of alienation is often re-focused to create a plot that might be more enjoyable and identifiable for some lesbians, the lesbian detective formula's adherence to the ideology of American individualism is not significantly weakened.

Having recognized then that there are distinct similarities between the lesbian and traditional detective formulas, my argument with Klein's statement is not that formula fiction does not usually favor the heterosexual male power hierarchy in the United States--clearly this is the

case. Rather, I believe that she fails to acknowledge that formula fiction might also reinforce a value system outside the hegemonic culture. Such is the case with much lesbian detective fiction. Further, because she ignores the unique circumstances surrounding the creation of lesbian detective fiction, I reject her presumption that all experiences of reading representations of women detectives can be generalized as non-feminist.

Klein portrays formula fiction as a hegemonic entity unto itself: it is not. Formula fiction is merely a literary tool that both represents and promotes the ideology of a specific social group. The fact that formula fiction was initially created for the enjoyment of a patriarchal audience does not condemn it to remain forever a vehicle for the values of the dominant heterosexist, patriarchal, cultural hegemony. Lesbian detective fiction can also be seen as the product of a disenfranchised social group appropriating the traditional detective formula to create literature that both empowers and reaffirms their values. And it is not unlikely that this appropriation and alteration of the formula to meet the specific needs of its lesbian audience have affected the popularity of the genre.

The lesbian detective formula alters the traditional detective formula in two ways: it includes a confrontation scene between the lesbian detective and a symbolic oppressor and a sexual encounter between the lesbian detective and another lesbian character. One significant characteristic

of much lesbian detective fiction is its specific attack on the stigmatization and devaluing of the lesbian lifestyle in the United States. The lesbian detective's disgust is generally with individual attitudes and not institutional practices, although there are certainly novels in which this also takes place. In Sarah Dreher's Gray Magic lesbian detective Stoner McTavish confronts her lover's grandmother about her bigotry:

"I don't give a damn!" The words exploded from her.

"You're an ignorant, self-righteous woman. Do you have any idea what it means to be a lesbian?"

"I do not," said Mrs. Burton. "And I don't want to." Stoner strode across the room. "We do the dirty work in this world. We set up Crisis Centers to protect you upright, uptight 'normal' women from battering husbands. We fight for your Medicare and Social Security. We push your wheelchairs and wipe up your urine when you're too old and feeble to do it yourself. We do all the work you're too 'lady-like' to touch. And for that we're called names, and fired from jobs nobody wants. When we go in public restrooms we see hate written on the walls by people who are too ignorant to spell but claim the right to judge us. When we pick up a newspaper, we see letter from Bible-quoting cretins telling us our gay brothers are dying of AIDS because Gods despises what we are. But we go on living, Mrs. Burton, because we earn the right. We live in a world of hate, and we still manage to love . . ."¹⁴

This passage is typical of the "confrontation motif" in much lesbian detective fiction, where the personal growth and strength of the character replaces the more masculine and often physical tenets of "rugged individualism" which predominate in the detective formula analyzed by Cawelti. Although an assault on hypocrisy is often found in much traditional detective fiction, lesbian detective fiction de-emphasize physical conflict in favor of symbolic

confrontation that stresses the need for the understanding and acceptance of lesbian sexuality; the creation of lesbian detective fiction is intended to reassure and unite its readers on the basis of their common oppression. The desire for a sympathetic, unified lesbian community can be seen in this rhetorical speech at the conclusion of Katherine Forrest's Murder at the Nightwood Bar:

"Dory tried to talk to me about her parents," Patton said mournfully, "I wouldn't listen. I told her to just let the hell go of them."

"Patton, I told her that too." Maggie said, "and we were both right. I'm telling all of you," she addressed the roomful of women in a firm voice, "we can't choose our parents but we can sure as hell choose how we feel about them. Why should we love anybody who doesn't accept or respect us? Besides," Maggie said, her voice lowering to its usual soft tones, "we have the power in us to make our own families."¹⁵

Although the actions of these and other lesbian detectives are certainly "individualistic" in some sense, the lesbian detective formula de-emphasizes the win-at-all-costs attitude of rugged individualism in an attempt to promote the identification/unification purpose of the literature.

Rugged individualism is used in the traditional detective formula to regain something that the detective perceives he has lost. In some cases it is his own personal innocence, but most often it is an established social order that has been violated by the corruption of certain individuals or institutions. As Geherin said in his description of the American private eye, he is someone "whose efforts are dedicated to the pursuit of the noblest

ideals of his society." In the dominant American ideology such ideals can include justice, equality, and freedom. But the historical and social reality of the lesbian experience in the United States prevents this utopian concept of justice from being the same powerful motivator for the actions of the lesbian detective. Instead of unyieldingly pursuing such ideals, the genre promises its readers a reaffirmation of the value of their sexual orientation through the chance to identify with a successful and enviable literary character. Lesbian detective novels also attempt to promote tolerance and understanding by depicting unprejudiced heterosexual characters who support gay and lesbian relationships. In Sarah Dreher's Stoner McTavish novels the character of Stell often provides encouragement to Stoner and her lover Gwen in their on-going fight with Gwen's grandmother:

"What I hope you'll stay clear on in all of this, is that it's her that's in the wrong, not you. Don't go getting down on yourself for loving. There's a lot of hurting and a lot of hating going on in the world, and I think it's time the ones that do the hating start doing their share of the hurting."¹⁶

Realizing that the pursuit of a virtuous and just society is unrealistic, many lesbian detective instead strive for the more attainable goals of tolerance and understanding.

The lesbian detective formula also alters the conventional detective formula with the significant emphasis it places on sexual encounters between characters. This is understandable when it is considered that a primary function

of the genre is to reaffirm the value of the reader's sexual identity; the inclusion of the sex scene substantiates the homosexuality of the detective and therefore strengthens the lesbian reader's identification with her actions and beliefs. This forthright depiction of lesbian sexuality probably increases the appeal of the genre for some readers.

In the traditional hard-boiled detective novel, sex is used as a commodity and bargaining tool. In her discussion of Dashiell Hammett, Hamilton describes what Hammett called the "exchange mentality" of his characters where sex was traded for security, money was traded for sex or protection, and strength was traded for loyalty. If this process broke down, the characters in the hard-boiled novel were left to "take what they wanted." This concept of sex as a tool or commodity that may be used to purchase or fill a specific need is the antithesis of the depiction of sex in the lesbian detective formula. The portrayal of sex in the hard-boiled detective novel is influenced by the heterosexual, patriarchal nature of its formula, which objectifies women and often links sex with violence, as in this description from Hammett's The Maltese Falcon:

He had put the coffee pot on the stove when she came to the door, and was slicing a slender loaf of French bread. She stood in the doorway and watched him with preoccupied eyes. The fingers of her left hand idly caress the body and barrel of the pistol her right hand still held.¹⁷

In contrast, a similar dinner-seduction scene that takes place in Katherine Forrest's The Beverly Malibu features a

less phallic and more equal exchange between the lesbian detective Kate Delafield and her lover Aimee:

The buzzer sounded.

Surely it wasn't . . . She flipped on the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Hi. It's me."

Aimee, again wearing the leather jacket, holding a bag of groceries, brushed past Kate and went into the kitchen.

"I thought I'd make us dinner." She opened the refrigerator. "You ought to throw this crap away. The way you eat is terrible."

Kate, arms crossed, leaned back against the cupboards and watched entertained, as Aimee quickly unpacked pasta, hamburger, cans of sauce, french bread, a large bottle of seltzer. The young woman was amazingly beautiful . . . ¹⁸

The point here is not to compare seduction scenes involving heterosexual and homosexual couples but to acknowledge the way in which some lesbian detective fiction abandons the sue of violence and the "exchange mentality" in favor of a more equal, less objectified description of the sexual encounters between the lesbian detective and another lesbian character. Heterosexual male readers of detective fiction might identify with the powerful masculine Sam Spade. It is not unlikely that some lesbian readers might identify with the sexuality of Detective Kate Delafield.

And so although the writer of lesbian detective fiction is working within the basic framework of an inherently patriarchal formula she is not, as Klein insists, totally participating in her own disenfranchisement. She is also reclaiming a literary genre for a lesbian audience through the feminist tact of refocusing the anger of her oppression.

The traditional mystery formula is similar to the traditional detective formula, but the mystery formula functions more like a puzzle. It presents the reader with a crime and fixed number of suspects. The readers follow the actions of the detective much as if they themselves were trying to solve the crime (as indeed they often are). After a significant chase the guilty party is apprehended. The mystery formula is essentially a neat and cathartic one, and no amount of bizarre and complicated clues will alter the eventual outcome of the administration of justice. The reader feels both a sense of relief and a sense of fulfillment at having been mentally included in the detective's attempt to solve the enigma; the formula includes the audience in the act of detection. The successful solving of the crime also reaffirms the cultural status quo by reassuring the reader that good deeds will be rewarded and evil actions punished.

Although the character of Kate Delafield is a police detective, the novels in which she is featured primarily follow the traditional mystery formula. Amateur City is essentially a "locked room" mystery; the chief executive of an insurance firm is murdered in his office one morning and only certain employees have keys to the building. This immediately narrows the list of possible suspects to a fixed group and the entire course of the novel is then devoted to discovering the guilty individual. Katherine Forrest's Kate Delafield novels are currently the most popular works of

lesbian detective fiction and perhaps it is their adherence to the traditional formula that accounts for their success. In addition, Kate Delafield detective novels are characterized by the difficult, secretive life that a lesbian police officer must lead.

The lesbian police detective is in the precarious position of being pledged to uphold a judicial system that is inherently unjust and discriminatory, one that denies her legislative protection and often criminalizes her sexual relations. Realizing that her economic and professional success rely upon a discreet personal life, the lesbian police detective is forced to walk a thin line between personal integrity and public humiliation. She cannot afford to lose such a hard-earned job, but she also realizes the hypocrisy in concealing something that has undoubtedly led to much of her professional success as a detective. What better profession than detection for someone who must to an extent "conceal herself" all day long? Indeed in Amateur City Delafield calls the lesbian police detective "the perfect woman cop":

The brass loves me because I don't call in with problems about my kids. I don't take maternity leave. And the men love me because they're convinced any woman who wants to be a cop must be suffering from penis envy and my being a lesbian confirms that. And the men can tell their wives "Yeah, honey, I'm working with a woman but not to worry because she's a lez." And so the men's wives love me too. So I'm the perfect woman cop. Everyone can respect my work but still be contemptuous. So women can do the job they tell themselves, but only because they're pseudo-men.¹⁹

For the most part, the mystery formula maintains the same elements as the detective formula: there is a crime, motive, chase scene, revelation of guilt, and resolution in the end when justice is carried out. But because lesbian detective fiction has developed in the specific context of an oppressed minority, the "justice" that is executed can reflect values that are contrary to those of the dominant white, male, heterosexual, cultural hegemony in the United States. Not all lesbian mysteries feature police detectives, and some of the most successful lesbian detective novels have endings where the criminal is not turned over to the police.

In Barbara Wilson's Murder in the Collective, amateur sleuths Pam Nilsen and Hadley Harper ultimately decide to let the guilty person go because within the context of their value systems they do not feel her crime was blameworthy; she killed her abusive ex-husband who was blackmailing Philippine aliens and then informing the United States government of their whereabouts. The "killer" tells Pam Nilsen:

I think its funny, somehow, you know Pam, you and me were talking in the attic. And I said I wanted you to understand about women in other parts of the world and how you had to learn to care about them to be a feminist. And now maybe I'll spend the rest of my life in prison because of a white woman in America."

Zee said it quietly, as if it didn't concern her, but her black eyes burned into me, asking for something that I was finally able to give.

"No." I said, "you can't."

"No." Hadley repeated firmly. "The weapon's gone, they've got nothing on you other than that you married him. You're going to be trusting a few too many people

with your secret, but I swear you are not going to jail for Jeremy Plaice. You've got too many things to do to be spending your life in prison.²⁰

This is not say that all lesbian detectives selectively sanction murder, but that in certain works the mystery formula is altered to reflect a sense of justice and closure that is at the same time within the established formula framework and contrary to its heterosexist, patriarchal ideology. The characters of Pam and Hadley still arrive at the resolution stage of the formula after a crime and chase scene, but the resolution differs from the traditional police intervention and apprehension with which readers of non-lesbian detective fiction are familiar.

Ultimately formula fiction deserves examination because it is a powerful and popular expression of cultural beliefs and practices. Although I have separated the mystery from the detective formula in my discussion, the two are very similar and form the basis for all lesbian detective fiction. This fiction maintains the general framework of the master formula, but it differs in the values presented to its readers and implications of its characters' action. This is arrived at by altering specific elements of the formula to make it more enjoyable and applicable to the experiences of some members of its lesbian audience. These alterations include a re-focusing of the detective's attack on the hypocrisy of the American Dream so that it pertains to the experiences of lesbian readers, the inclusion of a confrontation scene in which the lesbian detective

challenges her symbolic oppressor, and the importance given to sexual encounters between characters to affirm the value of the detective's and reader's sexual identity. Although such changes do not radically alter the traditional patriarchal detective formula, lesbian detective fiction is not thoroughly anti-feminist. Ironically, this inherently patriarchal, heterosexist formula provides a useful framework for expressing certain aspects of lesbian culture--aspects which probably contribute to the success of the genre as a whole.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. John Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 8.
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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 1.
5. Stephen Knight, Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988), 4.
6. Kathleen Gregory Klein, The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 201.
7. Ibid., 2.
8. David Geherin, The American Private Eye (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Company, 1985), 199.
9. Mary Wings, She Came Too Late (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1987), 3.
10. Mary Wings, She Came In A Flash (New York: New American Library, 1988), 227.
11. Hamilton, 5.
12. International Lesbian and Gay Association, Ed., Second ILGA Pink Book (Utrecht University, 1988), 109.
13. Sarah Dreher, Gray Magic (Norwich, VT: New Victoria Publishers, 1987), 12.
14. Ibid., 13-14.
15. Katherine Forrest, Murder at the Nightwood Bar (Tallahassee, FL; The Naiad Press, 1987), 212.
16. Dreher, 7.

17. Dashiell Hammett, The Maltese Falcon (New York: Random House, 1974), 79.

18. Katherine Forrest, The Beverly Malibu (Tallahassee, FL: The Naiad Press, 1989), 194.

19. Katherine Forrest, Amateur City (Tallahassee, FL: The Naiad Press, 1984), 178.

20. Barbara Wilson, Murder in the Collective (Seattle: The Seal Press, 1984), 179.

CHAPTER III

READERS' RESPONSE TO LESBIAN DETECTIVE NOVEL SURVEY

The previous chapter on formula fiction attempted to relate the popularity of lesbian detective novels to the rhetorical inducements of formula fiction. It concluded that one reason readers enjoy lesbian detective novels is that they maintain the traditional detective formula while altering certain plot and character descriptions to increase their appeal to a specifically targeted lesbian audience. The intent of this chapter is to solicit from the readers themselves the reasons why they read lesbian detective novels. It seeks to understand the popularity of lesbian detective novels without "hermetically sealing off"¹ those people who account for its readership.

There is a basic epistemological conflict among critics of formula fiction regarding readers' consciousness of their reading. Critics like John Cawelti maintain that because formula fiction functions in a largely covert manner, readers are fundamentally unable to identify why they like a book; instead their responses are surreptitiously influenced by the ideology inscribed in the formula itself. Rejecting this notion in Reading the Romance, Janice Radway states that "it is this belief in the irreducible givenness of the

literary text and in the coercive power of its features to control reading that permits . . . critics to maintain that they can account for why people read [formula texts] by reading those [formula texts] themselves."²

There is of course some validity behind theories of the pervasiveness and influence of formulae, and only a foolish critic would maintain that formula literature is mindless entertainment. But as Radway concludes:

This view is troubling because its conception of ideology and domination seems to preclude the possibility of any kind of social change or resistance from the very start. It does so by reifying human process itself and by according extraordinary and preeminent power to the commodities produced and used within such processes rather than to the human activities themselves.³

My intention in this chapter is not to dwell on the difference of opinion between Cawelti and Radway in regard to audience awareness of the reading process, but to incorporate readers' responses into a more comprehensive examination of the popularity of lesbian detective fiction. The addition of a readers' response survey is not an attempt to undermine a view of the success of lesbian detective novels based upon the ability of traditional formula fiction to fulfill certain psycho-social needs. In fact, the results of the survey largely confirm the power of formulas to shape response. They also testify to the significant influence of the lesbian publishing industry in fostering the popularity of the genre. The survey has helped to identify other factors too, that might influence the

popularity of lesbian detective fiction, including the availability of many types of lesbian detective novels and the influence of critical reviews.

In order to evaluate readers' reactions to lesbian detective fiction, a brief survey was designed that was based upon a similar one employed by Janice Radway in her study of romance novels. A copy of this twenty-six question survey on lesbian detective fiction has been reproduced in the appendix to this paper. The first ten questions are designed to establish the reading habits and background of the reader, including whether she is a frequent reader of lesbian detective novels and detective fiction in general. They also ask the reader where she gets the lesbian detective novels she reads. The next seven questions concern the novels themselves: does the reader think that they are realistic, could the reader identify with the characters and actions in the novels, how do the novels make the reader feel. The last questions attempt to gauge the reader's comprehension of the ideology and structure of formula fiction, and to ascertain whether this is a significant factor in their decision to read lesbian detective novels. I have also asked for the names of any favorite lesbian detective authors and novels in an attempt to discern a pattern for their popularity.

There are of course drawbacks to such an approach. This specific study was inhibited by both the number of lesbian readers surveyed and the atmosphere in which the

survey was conducted. During the Spring of 1990 neither the State of Virginia nor the College of William and Mary recognized the rights of lesbians with protective legislation in the form of a non-discrimination clause. Despite my repeated assurances of anonymity, some regular readers of lesbian detective fiction who had previously committed to help with the study changed their minds at the last minute and decided against any involvement. The lack of a strong and identifiable lesbian community in Williamsburg made it difficult to locate prospective participants. Consequently, the study involves the responses of only ten readers, far fewer than I had hoped, and the majority of the respondents live outside the Virginia area. Since it is possible that the responses of some of the readers are influenced by the specific social and political conditions of the state in which they reside, it is important to note that the results of the survey are in no way supposed to be indicative of the attitudes and beliefs of any specific lesbian population.

However, I feel that the responses of these ten individuals provide valuable insight into the reasons behind the recent popularity of lesbian detective fiction and suggest that some readers enjoy the novels for reasons unrelated to formula-esque framework. In order to substantiate this conclusion it is first necessary to establish a profile of the ten respondents.

All ten of the readers began reading for pleasure between the ages of five and ten. They currently enjoy reading a variety of types of literature, including non-fiction, historical fiction, poetry, biographies, and, in the words of one academic malcontent, "anything I don't have to read for school." All read fewer than ten books each month for pleasure, including mysteries. Two are regular readers of traditional mystery fiction, in addition to lesbian detective fiction. Four are students, four are recent college graduates, and two work full-time to support themselves. Nine of the readers prefer books with lesbian themes or character; one reader has no preference. All ten began reading lesbian detective fiction within the last three years, although two said that they had read an isolated lesbian detective novel as many as five years ago. The ten respondents got their lesbian detective novels from different sources, including lesbian and gay bookstores, friends, co-workers, and the lesbian and gay student center at the university they are attending. The average age of the ten readers is approximately 23; the youngest is 20 and the oldest is 28. All defined their sexual orientation as exclusively lesbian, and the average number of lesbian detective novels read was approximately six.

What emerges from this profile is an image of young, college-educated lesbians who began reading for pleasure at an early age and continue to do so now as their leisure time permits. They have diverse literary tastes but prefer books

with lesbian themes; the relatively high number of lesbian detective novels they have read could indicate that perhaps the books hold their interest well or are easily accessible. It is clear that the majority of these women live in an area with a developed lesbian community and that they are comfortable enough with their sexuality to exchange lesbian detective novels with friends and co-workers. This is not necessarily true of all readers of lesbian detective novels. Nevertheless it should be mentioned that perhaps one factor contributing to the popularity of lesbian detective novels is their availability in bookstores and other places in areas with defined lesbian populations.

These ten women had remarkably similar ways of choosing whether or not to read a specific lesbian detective novel; six relied on the reputation and previous works of the author, six cited review in lesbian and gay publications, four asked the employees at the bookstores where they purchased the book, three mentioned the cover and comments on the book jacket, and all ten reported asking for friends' recommendations. This might suggest a number of things. It appears to support the important role played by the lesbian publishing industry in influencing the popularity of the novels by reinforcing the crucial role women's and alternative bookstores play in distributing the novels. The small size and community-orientation of the bookstores might make it possible for the readers to solicit the advice of a presumably knowledgeable (and lesbian) store employee, which

would undoubtedly be more difficult in a larger, less progressive bookstore like Walden Books.

It also reinforces the important link between lesbian newspaper and magazine publications and lesbian literature; the opinion of a lesbian book reviewer might influence the choice of detective novel for some readers. Lesbian publishing companies can also affect the popularity of lesbian detective novels based on what they print on the cover or book jacket of a specific novel; despite what many would like to believe, three of the readers surveyed felt it was possible to "judge a book by its cover." One reader specifically mentioned a novel that had a quote from the Massachusetts-based newspaper Gay Community News on its back cover. The reader trusted the newspaper's reputation and decided to purchase the detective novel based on her familiarity with the publication and not the author or novel itself.

These readers of lesbian detective novels are not unique in the manner in which they select a book to read. Indeed, many readers of all types of fiction often rely on the advice of friends, co-workers, and reviewers when deciding whether or not to purchase a specific book. But given the unique social and political circumstances surrounding the production and distribution of lesbian literature, the readers' responses can be seen as evidence of the effect that small, independent presses and supportive

women's community-oriented bookstores can have on increasing the appeal of the novels for a least some readers.

When asked what characteristics they liked to see in the lesbian detective, the responses of the ten readers varied significantly. Most frequently mentioned were intelligence, competence, strength/"butch," sensuality/sexuality, opposition to the system, and politically-correct behavior. It is important to remember that the opinions and attitudes of lesbians differ, and so do the depictions of lesbian detectives in the novels: a lesbian police detective is bound by the specific conditions of her job and cannot possibly enjoy the more "open," politically-correct lifestyle of some lesbian sleuths. The lesbian police officer often chooses to conceal her sexual orientation in order to retain her job and this reduces the appeal of lesbian police detective novels for some lesbian readers. As one reader says:

I enjoy Barbara Wilson's characters and Sarah Schulman's the most because they are independent and clever. They don't need guns and badges to figure out who the guilty person is, and they never lose their integrity or forget that they are lesbians. Their experiences just seem more realistic than some butch police detective who keeps her lover locked away to save her career.

And yet other readers enjoy the lesbian police detective novels because they envy the power such figures possesses and they sympathize with the sacrifices the character has had to make:

In a way [Police Inspector] Carol Ashton is a turn on for me because of the power and prestige she has; she

lives in Australia, leads a glamorous and dangerous life and ultimately has an effect on the world. Although I realize how contrived her image is I still like it and I think many lesbians in less glamorous positions can identify with the way she hides [her relationship with her lover] Sybil.

The diversity among lesbian detective novels--novels that feature characters who are sleuths, private eyes, and police detectives, set in both country and city locations--virtually guarantees that the lesbian reader will find at least one novel or series of novels that appeals to her. This diversity probably accounts for some of the popularity of the genre.

Although each reader found different qualities attractive in the lesbian detective, seven out of the ten agreed that "politics" and sexuality/sensuality were important plot elements. In addition, all but one believed that the detective's lesbianism was crucial for their enjoyment of the novel:

The whole point of lesbian mysteries it seems to me is that I can finally read a mystery story with a character in it that I can relate to. Sam Spade does not interest me. [Lesbian sleuth] Pam Nilsen does. And instead of simple murder plots the [detective novels] I enjoy most also raise issues that concern the lesbian environment that I am a part of--like AIDS, coming out, discrimination, gay-bashing . . .

It has been established in earlier chapters that "political overtones," in the form of either an overt discussion of political ideology or the covert suggestion of progressive politics, and sexual encounters between the lesbian detective and another lesbian character are significant characteristics of much lesbian detective fiction. It is

interesting then, but not surprising, that all ten readers placed such a high value on political themes and sexual encounters in their survey responses. For many lesbians, it is precisely these two factors that separate them from the dominant heterosexual male cultural hegemony in the United States: in choosing these two as the most significant plot elements the readers are astutely recognizing the distinguishing elements of their lifestyle and literature. How might such knowledge affect an interpretation of the popularity of the novels?

The survey suggests that lesbian detective fiction is popular because it maintains an altered detective formula that specifically appeals to a lesbian audience; the novels are essentially formulaic with the inclusion of specifically lesbian "political" themes and sex scenes, and the readers have recognized and identified this fact as significant for their enjoyment. The recognition of these elements might also be a reaffirmation of the value of their sexuality for some readers; the novels might have achieved a degree of their widespread popularity by presenting many readers with a positive representation of their often-persecuted lifestyle. In any case, it does appear that for at least some readers of lesbian detective fiction, the inclusion of political themes and sexual encounters in the novels is essential and might account for part of their popularity. This has likely resulted in the production of more lesbian detective novels with discernably political themes.

The ten readers also showed agreement concerning the outcome of the lesbian detective novels. Eight felt that it was unimportant to turn the criminal over to the police.

Typical was this response:

No. It is not important for the lesbian detective to turn the criminal over to the police because the police represent a patriarchal institution and do not stand for justice in the lesbian community. Besides, if the victim were gay the criminal would only get six months community service anyway--probably suspended.

Another reader offered this more thoughtful answer:

No. I don't really think it's important, at least all the time, because sometimes the lesbian detective is a better judge of what's a crime than the cops are. Like if the criminal is a battered wife who finally stands up for herself and kills her husband or partner probably the lesbian detective would let her go. But if the lesbian is a police detective then she pretty much has to turn him in--it's her job.

What emerges here is an image of justice that the readers would like to see carried out that both contradicts and supports the notion of formula as a determinant for the detective novels' popularity. Both readers' responses appear to negate or de-emphasize the importance of formula in lesbian detective fiction: the traditional detective formula frequently involves an ending where the criminal is turned over to the police. Or perhaps some readers of lesbian detective fiction enjoy the individualism projected by the novels because they believe their structure challenges the patriarchal status quo when the lesbian detective carries out her own code of justice, and that by reading the novels they are also challenging the established social order in their own lives. This would appear to

qualify Kathleen Gregory Klein's statement on the incompatibility of feminism and detective fiction; some lesbian readers enjoy lesbian detective novels because they join individualistic initiative and feminist ideals.

And yet heterosexual male detectives created in the traditional detective formula often impose their own code of justice on chaotic environments, and there is evidence to suggest that these eight readers would not enjoy lesbian detective novels as much if justice failed to be carried out in any form--a total break with the prescribed ending of the detective formula. This can be seen in the cynicism of the first reader's response and in the second reader's belief that all police officers, regardless of their sexuality or politics, must uphold the law. As one of the two dissenting readers on this question answered:

I considered saying "no, it isn't important that the criminal is turned over to the police" because it would be a submission to male authority, but to give the only judicial system we have a chance to punish a guilty criminal correctly I say "yes." If they're guilty, they should receive punishment.

Ultimately what emerges from the other eight readers' responses to the question is a concept of "situational justice." That is, the lesbian detective must administer justice in the novels in accordance with both her own personal belief system and status as a law enforcement officer. Perhaps it is this personal code of justice that makes lesbian detective novels attractive to some readers; it allows them to enjoy the security and certainty of a

formulaic ending without having to consciously acknowledge the patriarchal system that produces formula fiction.

The readers were in qualified agreement as to the degree to which they thought the incidents in the novels reflected those which happen in real life. Five of the readers thought that they resembled "closely" or "very closely" events and people that they had encountered in their own lives, while the remaining five saw some similarities in their own lives but could understand how they might more accurately reflect the lives of others. Perhaps most telling was this remark:

The lesbian detective's reactions and feelings toward people and events resembled my own to a fair degree, but that of course depends on the person and the event--not to mention my own mood. As far as the events taking place in real life, I'd say that outside of the crime the novels that I've read present a very decent reflection of the diversity of the lesbian community.

It is possible that the readers' perception of a certain degree of believability in the novels is paralleled by a similar belief in the larger audience of readers of lesbian detective fiction. This might suggest yet another possibility for the tremendous popularity of the novels. Of course the converse might also be true; the novels might be totally unbelievable for the majority of their readers and might in fact be widely read because they represent a fantasy or a method of escaping from the unpleasant obligations of daily life for many lesbians.

While it is difficult to draw any wide-ranging conclusions about the popularity of a specific literary genre from a survey of ten readers, some inferences can be made. It is apparent from the remarks of these ten women that the community-oriented network of the lesbian publishing industry has had an effect on the manner in which they selected a lesbian detective novel by providing the opinion of trusted, lesbian authority figures familiar with the novels. Since bookstores owned and operated by women often provided an accessible place in which the novels might be purchased, this too might affect the genre's popularity. The variety of detective novels available might contribute to the popularity of the genre by increasing its appeal to readers who wish to identify with specific types of lesbian detectives, including amateur sleuths, private investigators, and police detectives. The inclusion of themes that are politically significant to certain members of the lesbian community and of a sexual encounter between the lesbian detective and another lesbian character are important and formulaic elements in most lesbian detective novels and might also influence the popularity of lesbian detective fiction.

Members of this group also felt that it was important to have justice in some form meted out, although all respondents did not agree on whether justice was represented by the police establishment. This seems to support the structural view of lesbian detective fiction as essentially

formulaic, with elements altered to increase its appeal to a specific lesbian readership. Finally, the readers who were surveyed felt that the events and characters in the novels were generally realistic. Perhaps this verisimilitude helps contribute to the novels' popularity with a larger audience as well.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. Janice Radway, Reading the Romance (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 7.
2. Ibid., 7.
3. Ibid., 6.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to examine the recent popularity of lesbian detective fiction and to suggest reasons for its success. To do this it has been necessary to establish the unique political and social circumstances of its production and to understand the ability of formula fiction to both reflect and affect the values and beliefs of the group in which it is produced.

Lesbian detective fiction is only one part of a recent wave of lesbian literature that is being produced by a number of small, independent, woman-owned and operated publishing companies. It is also sold predominantly in lesbian and gay bookstores. I have collectively termed the close network of lesbian booksellers, producers, and distributors the "lesbian publishing industry," and there is evidence from the respondents of the survey that this "ownership of the means of production" has been crucial to the success of lesbian detective novels. The lesbian publishing industry can trace its roots to the founding of the Women in Print movement in 1976 and maintains a strong political and social commitment to both lesbian and feminist ideals and the production of lesbian and feminist literature. This has influenced the popularity of lesbian

detective fiction by producing and promoting the novels in a non-discriminatory manner that also reaffirms the value of the reader's sexual orientation. The lesbian publishing industry affects the popularity of lesbian detective fiction by making the novels easily available in bookstores in urban areas with developed women's communities and through direct mail marketing. It is also apparent from the survey that the critical reception of the novels by gay and lesbian publications can affect the popularity of the genre.

Lesbian detective fiction is an unusual subgenre of what popular culture critic John Cawelti has called "the American adventure novel," which features a resourceful, individualistic hero in opposition to a corrupt or physically threatening environment as its central theme. Lesbian detective fiction maintains this central theme but often alters the representation of its formulaic elements--crime, motive, chase, and resolution--to specifically appeal to its socially disenfranchised lesbian audience.

It is this maintenance of the traditional detective formula that makes lesbian detective fiction problematic for some critics. As Kathleen Gregory Klein has noted, the traditional detective formula is inherently patriarchal; any lesbian detective seeking to reestablish social order is contributing to her own oppression by reinforcing a privileged heterosexual male status quo. In some lesbian detective novels this fact is elided by deemphasizing the importance of the traditional ending where the criminal is

turned over to the police. If the lesbian is a private investigator she has the ability to carry out her own code of justice which may be in direct opposition to the values of the dominant society. Many readers of lesbian detective novels enjoy this type of detective novel best, and they criticize those whose works will feature lesbian police officials who disguise their sexual orientation to protect their jobs. Other lesbian readers find the police detective novels appealing. It is apparent that there is enough variety in lesbian detective styles to insure the genre's popularity for the diverse tastes of its lesbian readers.

It is impossible to deny that Klein's statement possesses a degree of validity, but, like most formula fiction, lesbian detective novels can be interpreted on more than one level. What I have proposed in this study is an alternative view of the novels that recognizes that while they appear to be perpetuating an oppressive status quo they are also, on another level, challenging the legitimacy of a social system that denies their heroes full equality. The creation of such lesbian police detectives as Kate Delafield also functions as a reclamation of the traditional detective formula for a socially disenfranchised lesbian audience. Formula fiction is an instrument of the culture in which it is produced; it is a vehicle for conveying an ideology and not an ideology itself. Since lesbian detective fiction maintains much the same formula as traditional detective fiction, this might indicate that some lesbian readers

implicitly accept the male dominated social order. But at the same time it is also possible that the literature is enjoying such tremendous popularity with many lesbians because they perceive it to be a reclamation or appropriation of a traditionally popular patriarchal genre for their own values and beliefs. The novels promote understanding and the acceptance of different social groups, and the actions of the lesbian detective enforce a type of justice that empowers women by punishing bigotry and oppression.

An investigation into the popularity of lesbian detective fiction ultimately raises more questions than it answers, and I believe this is tremendously important. It is crucial to our understanding of "America," both as a nation and as an ideology, to acknowledge the existence of diverse viewpoints in politics, religion, sexuality, and literature. To assume that formula literature must always function hegemonically is to deny it any vision of the American experience outside that of the dominant white male power hierarchy. (It also sets a dangerous precedent that lowers the value of the experiences of different groups living within the United States and makes certain literature more valuable and appropriate for study than others.)

Although lesbian detective novels are popular within the lesbian community, they remain virtually unknown to most heterosexual readers. An examination of lesbian detective novels then can only help scholars of American Studies with

what they wish to achieve: a more accurate and comprehensive vision of the complex diversity of the American experience.

APPENDIX

Lesbian Detective Novel Survey

I would appreciate it if you would take a brief amount of time to answer the questions on this form. I am conducting a survey to determine the reading habits and attitudes of people who read lesbian detective novels. I ask that you do not identify yourself in any way and that you understand that your participation is completely voluntary.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

1. At what age did you begin reading for pleasure?
a) 5-10 years b) 10-15 years c) 15-20 years
d) over 20 years
2. What is your favorite kind of book to read?
a) biography b) historical fiction c) science fiction
d) romance e) mystery f) fantasy g) western
h) other
3. Approximately how many books do you read for pleasure each month? If you are a student, please answer for the months when you are not in school.
a) 1-5 b) 5-10 c) 11-15 d) over 15
4. Approximately how many mysteries do you read each month?
a) 1-5 b) 5-10 c) 11-15 d) over 15
5. Do you prefer books with lesbian themes or characters?
a) yes b) no c) no preference
6. What kinds of lesbian fiction do you like to read?
7. When did you begin to read lesbian detective novels?
8. About how many lesbian detective novels have you read?

22. Do you feel that it is important for the lesbian detective to turn the criminal over to the police at the conclusion of the novel? Why?
23. What is your sex?
a) female b) male
24. What is your age?
25. What is your occupation?
26. What best describes your sexual orientation?

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VITA

Meredith Ahner Wood

Born in Madison, New Jersey, February 27, 1966.
Graduated from Mountain Lakes High School in that city, June 1984, B.A., Tufts University, 1988. M.A. candidate, The College of William and Mary, 1989-90, in the American Studies Program. The course requirements for this degree have been completed and the thesis, "Breaking the Formula: Politics and Sexuality in Lesbian Detective Fiction," was submitted in December 1990.