

## Introduction

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm thirty-two years old, twice-divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind.

Sue Grafton, "*A*" *Is for Alibi*

So begins the first of Sue Grafton's best-selling "alphabetized" detective series, featuring private investigator Kinsey Millhone. Successful in its own right, Grafton's series both participates in and is representative of a larger publishing phenomenon: the emergence of the female hard-boiled series detective. Since the late 1970s, this subgenre of the crime novel, written by women and centering on the professional woman investigator, has virtually exploded onto the popular fiction market. Grafton is perhaps the most remarkable case study, in part because of her marketable series titles ("*A*" *Is for Alibi*, "*B*" *Is for Burglar*, "*C*" *Is for Corpse* . . .), her exceptional sales figures, and her self-conscious status as a "professional" writer. Grafton, who had already established a career as a Hollywood and television screenwriter before she began writing mysteries, clearly saw "*A*" *Is for Alibi* not simply as an isolated creative act but as part of a professional project that had its context within the economic

conditions of the publishing world. Grafton says, “I was accustomed to being paid lots for what I wrote. When I decided to write mysteries, I said to myself, ‘Well, I’m going to write 65 pages of this book, and if it never sells, I won’t have to finish it.’ I was worried I’d devote a year of my life to ‘A’ and the publishers would tell me they’d done a book just like it, or, ‘sorry, we’re not doing private eye novels this year’” (“G Is for (Sue) Grafton” 7–8). Her long-term plan “to do a mystery series based on the alphabet” defines Grafton as an author of series fiction, aware that “marketing is as important as the writing when it comes right down to it. . . . I am, in effect, in business with Henry Holt and Bantam [her publishers]. We’re partners” (“G Is for (Sue) Grafton” 10, 11). The alphabet series, then, is a carefully premeditated—and profitable—set of “serial murders” in which both Grafton and her publishers (not to mention her readers) are implicated.

The opening paragraph of “*A*” *Is for Alibi* inaugurates the first-person female voice of Grafton’s protagonist. As a significant primary gesture, the detective names herself. She goes on to establish her identity in relation to her profession: Kinsey tells us what she *does* as an integral part of who she is, leaving conventional “personal details” (“I’m a nice person and I have lots of friends”) for later in her self-portrait. Kinsey’s introduction constitutes the opening frame for the story of her investigation of a crime. It is, moreover, *her own* story of her investigation, as distinguished from other accounts of the facts of the case: “I’ve already given a statement to the police, which I initialed page by page and then signed. I filled out a similar report for the office files. The language in both documents is neutral, the terminology oblique, and neither says quite enough” (1). The initial(ed) statement Kinsey endorses for the authorities and the report she simply fills out (rather than composes) for her office files are somehow inadequate to her experience of the crime and its solution: “neither says quite enough.” Her own telling, as conveyed in the novel’s narrative, both supplements and counters these “official” records. In it, a woman emerges into her own language, using the *nonneutral* first-person gendered voice and a more “direct” terminology

that evokes her complex responses to the case, responses the official documents literally do not take into (their) account. This voice is, ironically, made possible by the traditionally masculine tradition of male “tough guy” hard-boiled fiction.

In “*A*” *Is for Alibi*, Kinsey’s *unofficial* report is designated neither for officers nor office but for her female client, Nikki Fife. Indeed, each of Grafton’s novels identifies itself as the report Kinsey presents to her clients at the termination of her investigations in order to conclude her contract with them, and each novel ends with her “signature” closing, “Respectfully submitted, Kinsey Millhone.” The frame explains that the narrative as report is directed to a paying audience who has, both literally and figuratively, an investment in the case: the client. A succession of novels written for a popular market, the alphabet series is also self-consciously directed toward consumers, who contract for Grafton’s literary services every time they purchase and read her books. What is the role of these consumers, and what is the nature of *their* personal, social, and economic investment in Kinsey’s cases? What kind of “work” do the novels perform? What, in other words, are the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of the “contract” established between the novelist and her reading public, a contract that is in large measure defined by a dynamic relation between (female) gender and (private eye) genre? These are some of the questions that have generated *Detective Agency*.

Our names are Manina Jones and Priscilla Walton. We are literary scholars “licensed” in our investigations, not by the state of California but by the University of California Press and the academic institution for which it stands. The title of this study is meant to hint at the institutional agencies of publishing, marketing, and consumerism in which the hard-boiled detective tradition—and, more specifically, the re-visioning of that tradition as exemplified by writers like Grafton—originates. Our title also speaks of a concern with women’s ability to exercise individual and collective agency (the ability to act, to intervene) within the prescribed structures of such institutions. Writing for a popular market and

within the confines of both formula and series fiction, authors such as Sara Paretsky, Marcia Muller, Linda Barnes, Liza Cody, and Sue Grafton have strategically redirected the masculinist trajectory of the American hard-boiled detective novel of the 1930s and 1940s to what we would argue are feminist ends. Their writing, in other words, uses an established popular formula in order to investigate not just a particular crime but the more general offenses in which the patriarchal power structure of contemporary society itself is potentially incriminated. They use the popular novel as a lens through which to filter cultural issues and theoretical problems, providing a forum in which such issues and problems might be negotiated (if not solved) as part of the narrative of investigation. The feminist impetus of these novels, we contend, is established in the ambivalent relationship between contemporary works and the literary tradition, in the intimate connection between the individual reader and the novel in the act of reading, and in the more systemic interdependence of novelist, publisher, and audience. We would like to explore the dynamics of these relationships.

The title *Detective Agency* also suggests what we see as an important aspect of the feminist impulse of these novels in terms both of their content and their form. We do not want simply to discuss how any given novel details the process of setting up business as a female private eye, or establishing a woman's detective agency. Rather, we intend to examine the strategic means by which this group of novels confronts in an entertaining and accessible medium questions of women's agency in general. As Delys Bird and Brenda Walker put it in their introduction to *Killing Women*, "Women's crime fiction tells women readers a story about their own lives. It presents the fictional possibility of controlling events and issues that affect our lives and of bringing a measure of understanding to them" (38). These works also establish the distinctive voice of an empowered female subject, and this, clearly, is not just a formal but is also a political gesture. When Sue Grafton comments in an interview that "Voice is a big issue. Until I found the right voice for Kinsey Millhone, I wasn't in business" ("G Is for (Sue) Grafton" 10), she

too connects voice and the economy of publishing. The feminine voice of these novels, somehow, is literally what puts them in business, making them salable to what appears to have been a previously untapped readership.

Popular formula fiction is by its nature a kind of writing in which the writer's individual creative process must be seen in relation to the collectivity of authors who work, in effect, collaboratively to generate and modify the parameters and possibilities of the genre. For us, as co-authors of this project, the title *Detective Agency* points to the ways in which collaboration involves breaking down the illusion of the "heroic" academic who acts alone in producing a unique scholarly work: "agency" implies a social context rather than an individual effort. It is thus a term that can work at several levels to foreground our own self-consciousness about working within the institutional and communal structure of the academy. For example, this project has generated for us a community of people—both within our universities and outside them—who have chosen to take their private passion for reading detective fiction public, coming out of the academic closet as readers of popular fiction to contribute in "unauthorized" ways to this work. Writing not just as scholars but as members of a community of enthusiastic readers of detective fiction, we are thereby implicated as both subjects and objects of this study. A few moments ago we referred to being "licensed" by both the press and the university system. By this we meant that the developing fields of both feminist and cultural studies have opened a space (albeit a limited one, and one fraught with disciplinary and ideological tensions) within the academy at large and departments of English in particular to engage in the study of popular texts. This movement is reflected in the unprecedented growth of scholarly publications focusing on evaluative analyses of popular media of various kinds. As authors, therefore, we are implicated in a preexistent academic culture that licenses us to speak.

The practices of contemporary cultural studies make possible both an alternative field of vision and provocative new ways of envisioning "field" itself, since cultural studies works the borders between conven-

tional academic disciplines, using a “bricolage” of methodologies, including semiotics, textual analysis, survey research, and interviews in order to offer a self-consciously “positioned” analysis of cultural practices of all kinds (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg 2). As Tony Bennett puts it, such analyses tend to demonstrate the degree to which cultural phenomena are “intricated” with, and within, relations of power (“Policy” 23). Our field of vision here owes a great deal to work being done in cultural studies. Its specifically literary point of view takes in the realm of popular formula fiction, a class of writing best explained, as John Cawelti observes, by seeing the success of individual works in terms of analogy and comparison with others (*Adventure* 21). Cawelti argues that formula fiction is sustained by a reciprocal relationship with culture at large, both affirming existing values and beliefs and, potentially, helping readers assimilate changes to traditional ways of seeing (*Adventure* 35–36). While we certainly want to appreciate and explore the unique, aesthetically appealing qualities of the individual works under study, we are primarily interested in the elements they share. These elements are implicitly “underwritten” by the reading public, which systematically reinforces them as aspects of the formula through their buying habits. Our work is especially concerned with how these shared qualities relate to the kinds of beliefs and values they both reproduce and transform, particularly when it comes to issues of gender. Our methodology is deeply indebted to the formidable “detective agency” comprising the authors, editors, agents, and publicists who so generously contributed their time and astute perceptions in the interviews they allowed us to conduct with them, as well as to the mystery fiction readers who responded with such enthusiasm and openness to our reader survey. We have attempted to integrate the diverse voices of these communities into the texture of this study. Their insights are as important to our understanding of the genre as any provided by more conventionally scholarly commentary.

The list of works cited at the end of this book includes the writers who form the core of our study. Each is the female author of a detective

series published by a mainstream press that centers on a professional woman investigator and that, in terms of the generic conventions it exploits as well as those it subverts, must be seen in ambivalent relation to what has come to be known as the American hard-boiled literary tradition, a tradition best exemplified by “tough guy” writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane. The historical and economic trajectory of this re-vision of the masculine genre is explored in chapter 1, “The Private Eye and the Public: Professional Women Detectives and the Business of Publishing.” This chapter explores the advent in the late 1970s of what Maureen Reddy would call a “feminist counter-tradition” of women writing along hard-boiled formal and stylistic lines who are at the same time challenging the gender boundaries demarcated in earlier male writers and, indeed, potentially undermining the very system of values on which the male hard-boiled tradition is founded.

Chapter 2, “Gumshoe Metaphysics: Reading Popular Culture and Formula Fiction,” expands on the significance of formula fiction as a cultural product driven by popular demand and situates our analysis in relation to theories of gender, genre, and popular culture. Chapter 3, “Does She or Doesn’t She?: The Problematics of Feminist Detection,” uses the framework of feminist politics and counterdiscursive practice to delve into the subversive potential of women’s crime novels. Critics are certainly not unanimous in their appraisal of the women’s hard-boiled novel as an aspect of cultural critique; this chapter sets out the terms of the debate over the politics of the subgenre and positions our argument within it. In chapter 4, “The Text as Evidence: Linguistic Subversions,” we look at the specific ways that women writers both use and strategically alter the formal conventions of hard-boiled writing, considering questions relating to voice and style, while in chapter 5, “Private I: Viewing (through) the (Female) Body,” we examine the revisionary role of autobiographical form in women’s private eye fiction, considering the implications of the repositioned subjectivity made possible by locating

narrative voice in the female body. We make a connection between the scene/seen of the crime and “woman’s place”—and by this phrase we mean women’s place with reference to the narrative of detection, as well as to the publishing world. It is important to remember that behind the professional woman detective of fiction stands the professional woman writer, and this chapter confronts the role of both as working women: as novelist Julie Smith puts it in the cover blurb to Janet Dawson’s *Till the Old Men Die*, “With both author and sleuth, you know you’re in the hands of true professionals.” Chapter 6, “Plotting against the Law: Outlaw Agency,” looks at the private eye novel’s social and historical contexts. It also explores the female private eye’s ambivalent position in relation to the historicized “laws” of gender and genre, considering ways in which that “outlaw” status offers the potential for altering both the narrative and ideological paradigms offered by the traditional masculine hard-boiled novel. Chapter 7 directs its attention specifically to the eye of the viewer of film and television representations of the female detective since the 1970s.

This last chapter draws its title (“‘She’s Watching the Detectives’: The Woman PI in Film and Television”) from Elvis Costello’s memorable musical evocation of the traditional hard-boiled narrative in “Watching the Detectives.” The title of Costello’s song elides the subject of the verb “watching” so as to allow it to take as its subject both the woman in the song, a classic femme fatale in the hard-boiled mold (the chorus begins with the line “She’s watching the detectives . . .”) and, arguably, that of the male “speaker”/singer who, in effect, subsumes her gaze when he places the woman under surveillance in his narration of the song’s story. In the song, as in the hard-boiled novel, the femme fatale provokes the male gaze with her “looks” (“She pulls their eyes out with a face like a magnet”) and is ultimately punished for her potentially subversive subjectivity: when she’s watching the detective in the first chorus, “He’s so cute,” but she is finally warned “Don’t get cute” . . . on pain of death—“cute,” after all, in the song is rhymed with “Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!”



What happens to this model, though, in a version of the detective narrative where both the fictional private investigator and her author are women? How does the first realize subversive power through the agency of the private eye, and the second achieve it when she uses the agency of publishing to take the female private eye to the public? In this study, we're watching the detectives to find out.