

# Detective Fiction and the Idea of the Female Detective

with a look at  
Alexander McCall Smith's  
*No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*

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# Tzvetan Todorov – ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’

Todorov mentioned three types of narrative drives in crime fiction:

- the whodunit - effectively moves backwards to piece together past events (such as found in Hercule Poirot stories)
- the thriller - moves forwards in step with the characters (Mostly in spy stories such as those with James Bond)
- the suspense plot - combines both (as found in the Hitchcock films)

# Some forms

- Spy thrillers (James Bond or Modesty Blaise)
- Private Eye (Hard Boiled – impersonal and violent)
- Private Eye (Soft Boiled)
- Cozy Mysteries or Tea-Cozy Mysteries – Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Elizabeth Daly
- Classic Detective – Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay
- Police Procedurals – Ed McBain, P.D. James
- Whodunits – the clues are shared by all, the whodunit follows the “overcoming the monster” arc. A killer is on the loose, and they need to be caught.
- Thrillers - threats to the social order, heroes and villains, and deduction and resolution
- *Noir* – no moral compass, bad vs. worse, mostly about temptation and greed

# The initial idea of the detective

- Modernity and the idea of justice
- There is always a narrator/admirer figure
- The detective knows and sees all
- Quirkiness of the character
- Often unsocial
- Either a super-man or an artist figure

# Sherlock Holmes

- Probably the most famous super-sleuth
- English
- Physical
- Knowledge about everything
- Deduction – just by looking
- Psychology without empathy
- Gathers clues often under disguise
- Moves across class
- Final hypothesis by focusing on most likely explanation

# Hercule Poirot

- A challenge to the Sherlock Holmes model
- Refugee
- Does not like physical activities
- Does not have wide knowledge
- Reading ‘symptoms’
- Focuses on contradictions
- Psychology with sympathy
- No deduction but clue-based construction
- Process of abduction – recreating the sequence of events

# Jane Marple

- English
- “A surprising detective”
- The most famous female detective?
- Consulting detective at St Mary Mead
- No background in crime
- Knitting, gardening, gossip
- Mostly rural
- Spinster
- Never paid and often not thanked

# The usual process

- The detective and the narrator share information not insight
- Complete trust from the readers in the detective
- The villain is defeated/detected
- The detective becomes ‘super’ through the process
- The detective’s narrative *becomes* truth
- Convincing the audience is the goal



# The New Detectives

- Flawed, depressed, lonely, homely, existential
- Not enough gender fluidity though
- Not always the high-functioning sociopaths
- They become super in their struggle
- Equally intelligent and insightful
- Sympathetic and/or empathetic
- More of the artist than the superhero
- **Mostly masculine**

# *The Female Detective (1864)*

- The first fiction with a female detective at the centre
- by James Redding Ware  
(Pen Name: Andrew Forrester )
- The detective was Mrs Gladden
- The book had more curiosity value than any literary appeal

# A Few Famous Female Detectives

- **Letitia (Tish) Carberry** by Mary Roberts Rinehart (books 1911-1937)
  - **Miss Maud Silver** by Patricia Wentworth (books 1928-1961)
    - **Cordelia Gray** by P.D. James (books 1972-1982)
- **Patience McKenna** by Orania Papazoglou (a.k.a. Jane Haddam)  
(books 1984-1990)
  - **Sarah Kelling** by Charlotte McLeod (books 1979-2003)
  - **Amelia Peabody** by Elizabeth Peters (books 1975-2006)
- **Marti MacAlister** by Eleanor Taylor Bland (books 1992-2007)
  - **Kinsey Millhone** by Sue Grafton (books 1982-2017)

# Alexander McCall Smith

“The relegation of women to a subservient position within society – a position in which they were outsiders to the male-dominated worlds of work and affairs – meant that for women to be involved in the investigation of crime was a novel thing. Today one might expect that novelty to have faded, as women do all the jobs previously monopolised by men. Yet the idea of the female detective as being special or unusual still persists in literary and cinematic treatments of criminal investigation.”

Alexander McCall Smith

‘Why do we enjoy reading about female detectives?’

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/why-do-we-enjoy-reading-about-female-detectives-8289961.html>

# The series

- Functioning in Gaborone,  
Botswana
- Following the perceived  
African ethos
- Claimed cultural accuracy
  - Already a popular  
television show in the West



# Mma Precious Ramotswe

- Short. “Traditionally built”, Middle-aged
- Has not travelled much
- Assisted by J.L.B. Maketoni and Grace Makutsi
- Has no training
- Has old fashioned gumption
- Completely steadfastness in her actions
- Very good humoured
- Completely compassionate
- Full of Curiosity
- Wise
- Post-sexual

# *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*

- First published in 1998
- More than 15 books in the series
- Set in Africa
- The first female detective of her country

# The Cases

- Her cases are everyday and gentle.
- There are no super-villains here.
- Botswana has high HIV presence. The asexuality of the detective and the cases of infidelity may be silent nods to that.
- Not interested in building conventional cases
- Follows common sense and old-fashioned Botswana morality.
- Very much about the variety and resilience of a nation.
- Mma Ramotswe recognizes the difficulties her country faces – poverty, disease and drought etc – but would never leave.
- "Most of the time we are just helping people to find out things they already know." (Mma Makutsi)



# Recommended Reading

- Andrew Forrester, *The Female Detective* (1864)
- Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of (the) Four* (1890)
- Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930)
- Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, *Arthamanartham* (1933)
- Dashiell Hamnett, *The Thin Man* (1934)
- Raymond Chandler, *Farewell My Lovely* (1940)
- Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (1941)
- Sue Grafton, *A is for Alibi* (1982)
- Laurie R. King, *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* (1994)

# Some useful links

- 'Why do we enjoy reading about female detectives?' by Alexander McCall Smith  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/why-do-we-enjoy-reading-about-female-detectives-8289961.html>
- Alexander McCall Smith: A Reader's Guide  
<https://www.justbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/alexander-mccall-smith-readers-guide-babel-just-buffalo-2012-04-12.pdf>
- 'The lighter side of gender politics' by Tony Gould  
<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-lighter-side-of-gender-politics>
- Q&A with Alexander McCall Smith  
<https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/329347-the-no-1-ladies-detective-agency>
- A Crime Story or Metafictional Game? –A Definition and Redefinition of the Status of the Detective Novel in Martin Amis's London Fields and Tzvetan Todorov's "The Typology of Detective Fiction" by Joanna Stolarek  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280558039\\_A\\_Crime\\_Story\\_or\\_Metafictional\\_Game\\_-\\_A\\_Definition\\_and\\_Redefinition\\_of\\_the\\_Status\\_of\\_the\\_Detective\\_Novel\\_in\\_Martin\\_Amis's\\_London\\_Fields\\_and\\_Tzvetan\\_Todorov's\\_The\\_Typology\\_of\\_Detective\\_Fiction](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280558039_A_Crime_Story_or_Metafictional_Game_-_A_Definition_and_Redefinition_of_the_Status_of_the_Detective_Novel_in_Martin_Amis's_London_Fields_and_Tzvetan_Todorov's_The_Typology_of_Detective_Fiction)
- 'Miss Marple of Botswana' by Alida Becker  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/27/books/miss-marple-of-botswana.html>

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