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**The *Femme Fatale* in “Postfeminist” Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction:
Redundant or Re-inventing Herself?**

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English
at Massey University,
New Zealand

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2014

Abstract

The *femme fatale* of the hard-boiled era, who arrived in the late 1920s, seduced, shot and poisoned her way through pulp magazines, hard- and paper-backed novels, and films for almost fifty years, as the iconic figure of evil whose abjection secured a new masculine ideal that found its voice in the tough-guy detectives created by the likes of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane. But by the 1960s her particular brand of villainy was in decline. In the 1980s a new representation of the dangerous woman, in the form of the tough female detective subverted the genre, by decentring the masculine fantasy that was the source of the *femme fatale*.

The female detectives authored by women, such as Sara Paretsky and Katherine Forrest, were a product of second-wave feminism, which, in the 1960s, agitated for legal and customary rights within the masculine hegemony. By the 1990s, the feminism that had driven a host of social and legal reforms was felt by many to have entered a new phase, allowing for the postulation of the return of the *femme fatale* within postfeminist detective fiction as the representative of the abject “other.”

Contemporary gender politics and new postmodern representational regimes, however, make her return difficult. The cultural meaning attached to her has changed. The question is what different form of marginality, or “otherness,” can take her place? The focus of this study is to answer this question through a study of selected postfeminist detective fiction, framed by the theories of Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek.

This research suggests that the initial encroachment of the feminine, in the form of the hardboiled female detective, into the genre, and the further intrusion by aggressive women with no regard for hegemonic law, destabilises the masculine imaginary, and in doing so prepares the ground for a female imaginary, which though framed by the symbolic order, occupies its own space. The fiction of Declan Hughes, Megan Abbott, Stieg Larsson, Ian Rankin, and David Peace provides a mirror into a world where the *femme fatale*, moves, not necessarily in a linear progression, from being the guarantor of a particular brand of masculine subjectivity to a more diminished stature in the

recognition that she is too small a figure for representing evil in a world of global corporations, atomic bombs, and national humiliation.

Nevertheless, vestiges of the *femme fatale* remain in postfeminist crime fiction. However, the demands of feminism and the consequential reshaping of the established order make her survival, in whatever form of “otherness,” tenuous. While statistical evidence may provide some measure of women’s progress, perhaps the detective genre makes a better gauge. It reflects not the job numbers, or percentage of degrees earned, by members of each gender, but the changes wrought upon the sociosymbolic contract, and their effect upon traditional representations of gender, through the destabilising of a once-established masculine ideal.

Acknowledgements

To my two supervisors Doreen D’Cruz and Jenny Lawn, my unreserved thanks and gratitude for the way they steered me through this project. Even when I disappointed them with a particularly rough first draft, or presented a second draft weighed down by sloppy punctuation, they were never less than supportive. Their always gently delivered criticisms at times sent me into despair, but the unassailable logic of what they had to say quickly turned any dejection into positive determination and almost joy as I saw what a difference their input made to my revised version. I consider myself doubly blessed to have had the support of such an insightful and inspiring duo.

Without taking anything away from Jenny, I would like to make special mention of Doreen’s contribution. Not only was she the lead supervisor on this project, but she had previously supervised my Master’s dissertation. Then, as now, she was unfailingly helpful and constructive, and her proof-reading and editing were lifesaving. She has been part of my life for six years and I will miss her presence.

Thanks to the Distance Library Service who were absolutely flawless.

A special thanks also to Vivienne Durrant of Auckland’s Howick Library, who at the very beginning of this project introduced me to crime writers I had never read before, and as a consequence moved the focus of this study away from the “usual suspects” and onto some, perhaps, more interesting authors.

To Vicky Powell for her help in collating the finished work, and Laurie Thew whose sound advice as the project came towards its end, helped keep me focused.

Finally, but by no means least, to my wife Anne who will breathe a sigh of relief that now this has finished, long neglected house and garden maintenance will get the attention it needs. I thank her for her forbearance and support.

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