

Paretsky and Grafton: Feminism and the New Hard-Boiled Detective*

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Before I start on this little odyssey, I'd like to say that everything here comes from the heart. I'm a loyal fan, not a literary critic (as will soon become apparent), so I'm hoping that the breadth of my enthusiasm will make up for the lack of depth in my analysis. That said, let us turn to the topic at hand.

There are two relative newcomers to the mystery genre in the United States: Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. The major character in Paretsky's series is a female detective named V. I. Warshawski; Grafton's protagonist is another female p. i. (the current abbreviation for *private investigator*, the term "private eye" being totally passé, I suppose), named Kinsey Millhone. When people talk about either of these authors or their characters, they almost always mention them together. One of the things I would like to examine is why this should be the case.

Both of these women (Paretsky and Grafton, that is) write in the genre known popularly as that of the "hard-boiled detective novel". The essential difference between them and their intellectual predecessors is that their detectives are women.¹ Since the traditional "hard-boiled" detective has typically been an extremely *macho* sort of male living in a fairly *macho* world, it seems obvious that a woman cast in the same role would have to break free of certain female stereotypes. However, I don't think it follows necessarily that these women are "men in disguise".

This brings me to my other topic for exploration: are Kinsey Millhone and V. I. Warshawski feminist role models and, if so, what kind? It seems only fair to mention that my answer to this question is yes, and to apologize up front for the gross overgeneralizations I am about to put

* Este trabajo se presentó originalmente en el coloquio *¿Quién se robó el centenario de Agatha Christie?*, celebrado en la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM, en julio de 1990.

¹ One notable exception is A. A. Fair's Bertha Cool, but she was ugly and he was a man. Even so, although she was meant to repulse at the time, she's a delightful read in the light of modern-day feminism.

forth concerning the differences between men and women. As in all things, these remarks must be taken less seriously than they might appear. Categorical statements about how men and women view the world do not promote rational debate, but sexist bashing, which hardly seems to be the point. On the other hand, it is very difficult to articulate what is wrong with the male-female setup as it now stands without recurring to these radical and stereotypical conceptions, if only as a starting point.

An excellent case in point is a book which has recently spent several weeks on the best-seller list in the United States. *You Just Don't Understand!*,² by sociolinguist Deborah Tannen, analyzes the differences in conversational styles between men and women. Although it is filled with both male and female stereotypes from beginning to end, the fact that the book is so good has nothing to do with our buying wholesale into these ideas, but with our ability to glimpse grains of truth in them: they come close to our experience without *being* our experience. Tannen's virtue is that she takes neither the male nor a female side, but points out even-handedly just where the differences lie. In my personal view of the universe, this is all to the good, because if feminism does not serve to make life more rewarding for both women and men, then it is worth a lot less than we think it is. Men are as bound by their own stereotypes as women are by theirs. One of the goals of the feminist movement, it seems to me, is the loosening of stereotypes on both sides. Rigid and dogmatic feminism is as bad as traditional *machismo*.³ Thus, any flat-out pronouncements that "Men are like this while women are like that" are self-defeating from the outset and should be taken with a (very large) grain of salt.

Returning to the first question—why Paretsky and Grafton seem like the Chang and Eng of current American detective fiction—the easy answer is that there are many overt similarities between them. For one thing, both published the first mystery in their respective series in the same year, 1982. Both have kept up a steady pace since then, Paretsky's production amounting to seven and Grafton's to nine. There is, however, a noticeable difference in their titling practices: while Grafton has followed in the footsteps of the MacDonald who put a different color into

² M. Morrow, New York, 1990.

³ Except, perhaps in the political arena, which is by nature a place where things are only accomplished by concerted and unified efforts. Better working conditions for women, for example, have never been achieved without this.

each of his titles to help remind readers whether they had read them or not (her books come in alphabetical order, starting with *'A' is for Alibi*, and so on, up to the current *'I' is for Innocent*), Paretsky has more variegated titles.⁴

The two series are certainly in the “hard-boiled” mode: gritty first-person narrative by the protagonists, Millhone and Warshawski, who are down-to-earth, wisecracking, take-no-guff types who work out of run-down offices, drive cars that have seen better days and live in non-too-opulent surroundings. Now in their middle to late thirties, both were only children who have lost their parents and all their close relatives. (Warshawski has a mad aunt and a cousin who, fortunately, keeps his distance, but Millhone has no one). Both were involved with the forces of law and order before taking up their present professions, Kinsey as a cop and V.I. as a public defender. Their apparent outlook on life runs to the cynical, although deep down they operate with a moral code that defines quite rigidly what is acceptable and what is not (murder and betrayal are not; other things are iffy). They keep in shape by jogging, although neither one likes it very much, and Warshawski is very much into volleyball, as well. Their tongues are sharp and their palates prefer Scotch. Their love lives also show close parallels: both are divorced (Millhone twice, Warshawski once); they fall into not-very-intense affairs on a semi-regular basis, sometimes even with the people who turn out to be the bad guys.

⁴ In the interests of bibliographical accuracy, the titles in Grafton's series are *'A' is for Alibi* (1982), *'B' is for Burglar* (1985), *'C' is for Corpse* (1986), *'D' is for Deadbeat* (1987), *'E' is for Evidence* (1988), *'F' is for Fugitive* (1989), *'G' is for Gumshoe* (1990), *'H' is for Homicide* (1991), and *'I' is for Innocent* (1992). Paretsky's novels are entitled *Indemnity Only* (1982), *Deadlock* (1984), *Killing Orders* (1985), *Bitter Medicine* (1987), *Blood Shot* (1988), *Burn Marks* (1989) and *Guardian Angel* (1992). There are actually several more women writing about “hard-boiled” female detectives—Lia Matera, Linda Barnes, Gillian Roberts and Patricia D. Cornwell come to mind—but Paretsky and Grafton have been at it longer and more consistently than any of these. Lia Matera has produced five novels so far, *Where Lawyers Fear to Tread*, *A Radical Departure* and *Hidden Agenda*, featuring Willa Jansson, as well as *The Smart Money* and *The Good Fight*, with Laura DiPalma. Linda Barnes has written eight, all of which are excellent. Only in the last four, *A Trouble of Fools*, *The Snake Tattoo*, *Coyote* and *Steel Guitar*, has her female detective Carlotta Carlyle made an appearance. Gillian Roberts has weighed in with *Caught Dead in Philadelphia* and *Philly Stakes*. Patricia Cornwell is a newcomer to be particularly watched. Her detective, Medical Examiner Kay Scarpetta, is less hard-boiled than the others, but her mind is at least as sharp as the stainless steel scalpel she uses for autopsies. The first novel in this series, *Post Mortem*, is chilling and unsettling, and many women readers find it both hard to put down and hard to keep on reading: the crimes consist of a series of brutal torture-rapes which end in murder. Her second, *Body of Evidence*, has just appeared.

Of course, it isn't totally impossible to tell the two apart. Warshawski is the one who dresses well: expensive suits and silk shirts, imported Italian pumps. She manages to go through several of these outfits during each case. Millhone, on the other hand, is more practical about these things—"cheap" is her own assessment of the situation—and generally limits her wardrobe to jeans and tank tops.

Warshawski is more into space: she drives a marginally larger car and her apartment has rooms in it. Millhone drives a VW and lives in a garage converted into a single room. Both their living quarters and their automobiles have been destroyed at one time or another in the pursuit of assorted villains, making one wonder why, if the pay is so low (and sporadic) and the cost of doing business so high, either one continues to do it. This, of course, is one of those cases in which the reader must willingly suspend disbelief, a feat necessary to the swallowing of any work of fiction. This isn't real life, folks. It is an entertaining and thought-provoking caricature of it, but a caricature nonetheless.

It is also to be noted that, while these women seem to be at similar places in their lives, their backgrounds differ considerably. Kinsey is a California WASP, although this condition is mitigated by the fact that she was orphaned as a child and raised by an aunt with decidedly non-mainstream ideas. V. I. (or Vic, as she allows her friends to call her) is a totally ethnic Chicagoan: her father was Polish and her mother Italian. She herself is a non-practicing Jew. Gabriella, her mother, died when V. I. was fifteen, and Tony, the father, died sometime later, but both hung around long enough to imbue her with a sterling set of moral values.

Certainly the most noticeable difference in the flavor of these novels is their respective settings. As anyone familiar with the United States knows, Chicago and Southern California inhabit different existential planes. Warshawski deals with workers, unions and the ethnic melting pot in every novel. Millhone thinks nothing of driving from her fictional Santa Teresa to Los Angeles and on to Las Vegas in the pursuit of information. It is hard to imagine either of these things happening in the other's series.

To return to the similarities between the two series, however, there are two answers to the question of what makes us think of one when we think of the other. One of these is fairly blatant: in order to write within a particular genre, one must conform to certain aspects of it. In the case of Paretsky and Grafton, the question is why the two series should be so "generic", because I am quite sure that conformation to the exigencies

of the genre is the main element contributing to the *aire de familia*, the family resemblance between the two.

Working within a fairly well-specified literary mold is by no means reprehensible: some of the world's best literature is totally ensconced in genre.⁵ Obviously, the best literature both works within its genre and at the same time transcends it. What is in fact surprising to me is that a good many mysteries *do* transcend the limits of the school in which they are rooted (my personal favorites in this sense are the novels of Michael Innes and Amanda Cross).

I must say that I'm not sure whether Grafton and Paretzky actually do so (Paretzky comes closer to it than Grafton, I think), but they are certainly able to use the genre to their advantage, especially as a tool for feminist criticism. It is only fair, however, to point out that not everyone I've talked to agrees with this assessment, a point to which I will return later.

The other answer to the question of why Paretzky and Grafton's works are so similar is more subtle. It has to do with the way in which Warshawski and Millhone's worlds are structured. These women are both alone in the world, but they have taken on pseudo-families as a means of coping.

Millhone has an eighty-one-year-old landlord, Henry Pitts, who bakes bread and makes up crossword puzzles. He also makes one hell of a father figure. Warshawski has a downstairs neighbor, a Mr. Contreras, who doesn't get along with his own daughter very well, but who looks upon V. I. as the next best thing. Warshawski has a mother, as well, in the form of Charlotte Herschel, M. D., better known as Lotty. Lotty is Austrian, Jewish, a refugee from the Second World War and an obstetrician who deals in difficult pregnancies.

Both Warshawski and Millhone have aunts and uncles of a certain type. The uncles are policemen who try to warn them off their cases as being too dangerous and, of course, matters that only the police should handle. Lt. Bobby Mallory was Tony Warshawski's best friend when they were both on the police force. Tony asked him to look after V. I. when he died, so he sees himself as V. I.'s guardian angel. Con Dolan was Millhone's boss when she was a policewoman herself. Both of these men seem to think they have not only the right but the duty to make sure

⁵ *Genre* is to be understood here in quite a specific way: in this case, for example, I refer not to the novel, but to the fictional narrative murder mystery of the hard-boiled, puzzle-solving variety.

that the women act like little ladies and stay out of trouble. The men in question think they are acting out of concern for their charges' welfare. The women think they just have an outsized need to control others and that women are the easiest targets. The reaction (or perhaps I should say, knee-jerk response) of both these women to such solicitude is to dig in their heels and become more involved in whatever happens to be going on rather than less.

The ersatz aunts are of a different breed altogether from the uncles. In Millhone's case, she is a large, ugly Hungarian woman named Rosie, who runs an ethnic restaurant. For Warshawski, the person in question is Sal, a large, good-looking black woman who runs the bar at V. I.'s favorite hangout. They seem to be interested only in their customer's appetites and love lives, as any good aunt should be. They listen (sometimes even patiently) to their charges' troubles and dispense earthy advice along with the food and drink.

I don't think these more or less familial relationships are products of coincidence, but are actually quite basic to the genre—or at least to the updated version of the genre that Grafton and Paretsky put forward. Chandler's and Hammett's characters were not only individualists, but they were also loners. Millhone and Warshawski are most definitely individualists, but they aren't really loners. I think that perhaps Sam Spade and his confrères *had* to be isolated from society to channel their authors' criticism of that society in the way they did. Being an outsider is a ground rule of the genre.

Women, on the other hand, have not traditionally been in a position to abstract themselves from the people around them. If their voice is to be raised to denounce injustices and point out the ironies of fate, they have had to do it from inside the network of human relationships. That is, they must be outsiders on the inside, so to speak. Whether this allows for a stronger and more convincing form of commentary, I don't know, although I think it probably does. At the very least, it offers a fresh perspective on the problem.

Maintaining relationships has generally been women's long suit in the scheme of social responsibilities over the millenia, so the fact that Kinsey Millhone and V. I. Warshawski are enmeshed in networks of their own making is of special significance as far as the mystery genre is concerned: given the generic limitations of a protagonist who has no family ties, male authors have turned their characters into loners; Paretsky and Grafton have turned theirs into members of a close-knit social group. This is the main reason that, in spite of the comments to

which I alluded earlier about Millhone and Warshawski not being good role models for women, I do not think of them as “men in disguise”.

What *does* happen in both cases is that these characters have shed certain elements which are associated with the stereotypical female in American society. One of these elements is woman’s role as a reconciler of differences in any given situation. (This is a point, by the way, which surfaces over and over again in Tannen’s study.) Warshawski and Millhone are certainly *not* conciliatory, and this is the quality which, more than any other, separates them from women raised in a more traditional mold.

Another thing they are not is physically weak, and they do not go out of their way to avoid violence. But, on the other hand, they don’t go looking for it either, which is so often the case with the hard-boiled male. Furthermore, neither one of them has the makings of a housekeeper. They neither cook nor clean: the home fires do not burn in their hearths. They basically do what any woman, unfettered by what society has set for her as her “role” in life, would do under the circumstances.

On another front, much has been made of women’s fear of success: it has been claimed that one of the things that has held women back in the world of business is that when they get close to a goal, they find it impossible to give everything they have to achieving their objectives. Of course, as time passes, this charge sounds more and more ridiculous, because it is the sort of problem that dissolves in the mist once it has been pointed out. If the fear of success in business was women’s way of internalizing society’s subliminal warning that they should stay away from the professional world, the only things necessary to shake this mindset were the sight of a few women becoming successful and the realization that this was an obstacle more imagined than real.

The fear of success has certainly never hindered Paretsky and Grafton’s protagonists. They are fiercely competitive and damned sore losers. And, in this, they are excellent role models: if any of their readers have trouble imagining how to come across with the right stuff at the right time, Warshawski and Millhone show how it can be done in hundreds of situations.

Now, if the loss of certain supposedly “feminine” traits keeps the two protagonists from being cast in the prototypical mold, it does not put them into the category of males in drag. If one takes a close look at the male stereotypes in these novels (and there seems to be no lack of them), one finds that besides being uncooperative and aggressive—traits they share with their female counterparts—they are also manipulative and

controlling, locked in a fairly relentless power struggle with most of the rest of humanity.

I would venture to say that women find the need to be in control, one of the most incomprehensible male behaviors of all, especially since they find themselves on the receiving end so often.⁶ The men in these novels are, generally speaking, one-dimensional, and not, I suspect, because the authors are incapable of developing a male character. Rather, the cardboard nature of some of these people has more to do with underlining just how limiting it is to be a compulsive controller. As I mentioned at the beginning of this rumination, traditional male-female stereotypes are as terrible for men as for women, and both need to be addressed.

The one trait I find totally unlikable in both these characters is their stubbornness. Not the stick-to-it-iveness that makes them determined, but the sheer pig-headedness that makes them do things they know will make life harder for them in the long run. In a typical situation, Warshawski is taken for a ride by a mobster who wishes to frighten her into staying away from something he is involved in. Instead of simply vowing to get to the bottom of the affair, she feels it necessary to wise off to the man, thereby earning herself a beating as well as a warning. Neither seems to be able to find the fine line between standing up to people because it is the way to get things done and irritating them in such a way that it is a virtual certainty that nothing will be accomplished. The only thing to be said for this tactic is that it is a great plot-advancer: neither Kinsey nor V. I. would be in half as much trouble as they are if they had a little more judgment in these matters.

As a last observation, I'd like to say that the feminist stance in these novels is quite American: rugged individualism is rampant. Solidarity among women, while certainly not absent, is a secondary theme. Social betterment for women as a group is barely even touched upon, with one important exception: Lotty Herschel, Warshawski's friend and mother-substitute, runs a clinic for economically downtrodden mothers-to-be. She pretty well exhausts herself trying to make life more livable for these women and, not coincidentally, is probably the most liberated woman in either of the series. She is also, not coincidentally, not American.

⁶ Admittedly a low blow, but lack of time and space prohibit my going into a comparison of male and female manipulation. Suffice it to say that the first comes from a position of power and the second does not, which makes all the difference in the world.

While I find a few things to criticize in these novels, there is at least one aspect of them that is quite positive: Kinsey Millhone and V. I. Warshawski are extremely therapeutic. When I find myself trapped by the fences that this —and any other— society builds around its members in general and its women in particular, I return to these novels. The gimme-a-break and get-outa-my-way philosophy espoused by these two is bracing, to say the least. The notion of staying power in the face of all obstacles is inspiring, and one is often in sore need of a reminder that the hard things in life are “do”-able and, more importantly, *should* be done. I read Paretsky and Grafton and I act differently. If their stories had no other redeeming quality, they would be worth the read for this alone.