

# Lover, Avenger or Deadly Delusionist? Women Murderers in Contemporary Crime Fiction

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*Naisten väkivaltaisuus on tabu, mutta populaarissa rikoskirjallisuudessa naisten väkivallan kuvaukset ovat lisääntyneet yhteiskunnallisen muutoksen ja rikoskirjallisuuden kasvaneen yhteiskuntakriittisyyden myötä. Vaikka tutkimuksessa on kiinnitetty huomiota naispuolisen etsivän kuvauksiin, naispuolisen murhaajan toimijuus on jäänyt huomiotta siitä huolimatta, että se on sekä lajityypin muutoksen että feministisen, vallan ja sukupuolen rakentumisen analyysin kannalta keskeinen. Artikkelissa hahmotellaan neljää narratiivista väkivaltaisesta naisesta rikoskirjallisuudessa. Lähtökohtina narratiiveille ovat rikostarinan kolmen peruspilaria (rikos – selvitysprosessi – päätös) murhaajan näkökulmasta. Artikkelissa todetaan, että perinteiset tarinarakenteet toimivat toisaalta lajityyppiä ja naisten väkivaltaisuuden diskurssia uudistavina, mutta toisaalta ne pitävät yllä perinteisiä narratiiveja.*

**Keywords:** crime fiction, popular narrative, women murderers, doing gender

## 1 Introduction

Our time is obsessed with popular narratives of crime. Murders in Edinburgh, Stockholm or Los Angeles fill our TV-evenings, and old classics return to the movie screen in updated versions. New crime titles are published at a growing rate, and every year stories of crime and violence appear on the lists of the most sold books. Through the introduction of new titles the crime genre is also becoming more and more varied, but despite new contexts, structural experimenting and the growing tendency to use crime narratives as vehicles of social criticism, the basic formula crime – detection – solution remains as the starting point.

Crime fiction has been regarded as an inherently masculine genre (cf. Tasker 1998; Munt 1994; Walton & Jones 1999): the writers who outlined its generic conventions on the Enlightenment ideal of rationality, as well as the first protagonists were men. As early as at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women writers such as Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie started to establish careers in crime writing, and in the 1980s a new generation of crime writers, influenced by the social and critical aspirations of their time, began to

reform the genre with a conscious feminist agenda in mind. The new kind of feminist crime fiction featuring agentive women detectives, for example Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone and Sara Pretsky's V.I. Warshawski, not afraid of resorting to violence when necessary soon became part of the mainstream.

During the past twenty years a number of studies have been done on this kind of detectives who represent female agency in crime fiction (cf. Tasker 1998; Munt 1994; Hapuli & Matero 1997; Walton & Jones 1999). Although in a minority compared to men, many crime stories also feature a female murderer antagonist whose agency is, in fact, quite crucial in the context of crime fiction in which a violent death, most frequently murder, functions as the narrative starting point: without the initiative taken by the murderer there is no story to tell. The roles of the women murderers as representatives of female agency have, however, escaped the attention of academics. The purpose of this article is to fill the gap. Readings of female agency reside at the heart of feminist literary scholarship, and to study the narratives of morally and socially deviant women is particularly revealing regarding the construction of gender and power. Because deviance always makes visible the norm, how the women murderers are represented makes visible the ideologies, values and practices that govern the inherently male discourse of power and violence in society. The question asked in this text is what the narratives of women murderers that emerge in contemporary crime fiction reveal about gender, power and violence in society?

My findings that are based on my reading of both male- and female-authored western mainstream crime fiction, published during the past two decades in North-America, Britain and the Nordic Countries. The narratives of women murderers that emerge in the material have been divided into four groups. This categorization is based on the formula that underlies basically all stories of crime (crime – detection – solution), but instead of taking the detective's agency as the starting point, I emphasize the corresponding focal points from the murderer's perspective. First, the motive for the murder: Why does the murderer kill? Second, the actual murder: How is it done? And third, the retribution: What are the consequences for the murderer?

## **2 Reading Narratives of Women who 'Do' Femininity against the Grain**

According to Chris Barker (2004: 131), a narrative can be defined simply as "a story or an ordered sequential account of events". We use narratives as ways of

making sense of reality by organizing material into a form in which it can be understood and handled. Also literary narratives – popular as well as others – play important roles in the construction of social reality as well as the construction and representation of identities (cf. Currie 1998). However, a story is never innocent in the sense that an ordered account of events is always an approximation of reality mediated by different, more or less conscious narrative choices. In narrative, reality appears to us either metaphorically (Ricoeur 1984) or as a metacode (White 1980), and narrated events and identities are constructed linguistically within certain cultural, ideological and temporal confines. Literary narratives are typically constructed through representation. Representation is a process of meaning creation through different ways of presentation in which ideologies, cultural practices and values are produced, inseminated and analysed through representation (cf. Hall 1992; Dyer 2002). Images of women or men in the media or literature are part of the incessant circle of the representation of cultural phenomena.

The ways in which the narratives of women murderers are constructed are guided by norms that determine culturally acceptable ways of being a man or a woman. Judith Butler (1991: 151) uses the term ‘heterosexual matrix’ about the set of norms and practices that naturalize ways of ‘doing gender according to the male–female dichotomy. By ‘doing’ gender Butler (1991; 1993) means a routinized repetition of everyday acts regulated by cultural norms and practices which, because based on the heterosexual imperative, determine this behaviour as either male or female. Within the heterosexual matrix only ways of ‘doing’ femininity or masculinity that are constructed according to its norms are intelligible and legitimate. Because violence is culturally coded as male (cf. Hearn 1998; Boyle 2005: 95; Chesney-Lind & Eliason 2006: 31), women’s violent behavior is a problem also from the point of view of gender. A violent woman ‘does’ femininity against the grain, and because of this discrepancy between culturally naturalized femininity and unintelligible behavior, a violent woman is conceptualised in terms of controversy. When a woman kills, her behaviour is said to “borrow from masculinity” (Björk 1999: 133), or she is demonised and presented as a monster whose acts are impossible to understand. This is why gender difference and the difference between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ behaviour becomes accentuated in the representations of violent women (cf. Boyle 2005: 94–98).

### **3 Four Narratives of Women Murderers**

In what follows I present four narratives of the women murderers that construct the cultural narrative of women's violence. As can be expected, women murderers appear in various guises. Although the stories follow the crime formula and repeat traditional narrative patterns such as the revenge story, they also contain material that gives room for scrutinising women's violence in a larger social context. In contemporary crime fiction a violent woman is no longer the incarnation of evil, an avenging angel or a one-sidedly sexualised femme fatale, but an individual affected by the social structures of power she is incapable of escaping. The first narrative tells about traumatised victims who metamorphose into avengers. The second one lifts up the family as a unit generative of murderer. The third one tells about perverted variations of a love story, and the fourth one centres around a trickster figure. Lastly, I discuss the third phase in the crime formula, the closure, as well as features common for all these narratives and outline some ideas of their female specificity.

#### **3.1 First Narrative: Traumatized Victims**

Contemporary crime novels often use the form of the traditional revenge narrative in which a story of victimisation is connected to a change from a passive victim to an active agent. In these stories a woman who has fallen victim of violence either directly or indirectly eventually turns against her oppressor. The change from a passive victim to the master of her own fate is triggered by a crucial loss – often the death of the to-be-murderer's mother – and it is described as a sudden metamorphosis through which the new identity is created. The narrative pattern is familiar from many crime stories in which an abject experience becomes generative of a new agentive identity, for example Henning Mankell's *The Fifth Woman* (2004/1996), Håkan Nesser's *Woman with Birthmark* (2010/1996), Fredrik Ekelund's *Nina och sundet* 1999 [Nina and the straight] and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2009/2006) together with the sequel *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (2009/2007) follow this pattern. In these novels violence is seen as inherently gendered: by telling stories of avengers created by male violence, the novels pay attention to this violence as an escapable part of society and criticize the structures that make possible the reproduction of the patriarchal ideology that legitimizes it.

Male violence women unite women in these novels. The victims' personal traumas are turned into political gestures on a collective level. Yvonne Ander in *The Fifth Woman* avenges the death of her mother on men responsible for violence against women in general, and Säde Vasara in Leena Lehtolainen's *Tappava säde* (1999) [Deadly beam] metamorphoses into an avenger after having witnessed too many cases of domestic violence, and directs her revenge against the men responsible for destroying the lives of their wives, partners or mothers.

In addition, the group of murderers I call 'delusionists' are also described as traumatised victims, but unlike the avengers, their murderhood is not based on a conscious choice but a compulsory, repetitive rejection of an initial trauma by murdering. This kind of 'rejection of the repressed' as a way of constructing identity is present for example in Nigel McCrery's *Still Waters* (2007), in which the murderer infiltrates the lives of elderly women and rejects her own traumatic childhood experience by adopting the identities of her victims after having murdered them one by one. In Inger Frimansson's *Råttfångerskan* (2010) [Rat catcher] the trauma of being deserted by her egoistic husband provides the murderer with an outlet for uncontrolled violence against new wife of the ex-husband. Delusioned murderers often make themselves guilty of hubris: they regard themselves as untouchable, as being beyond ethics and laws and therefore entitled to fulfill their own, narcissistic needs. They build a moral code of their own to justify their deeds.

As Olive Martin, the mysterious protagonist in Minette Walter's *The Sculptress* (1993) who is ostracized by her family and lives in a bipartite world of her own manipulating people, the delusionists have a specific characteristic that emphasises their specificity and becomes a metaphor of their murderhood. Olive Martin's voracious appetite for food, her pathological obesity and the wax figurines she models are abject expressions of her hubristic desires to be in control. Violet Chambers in *Still Waters* is fascinated by poisonous plants with the help of which she murders her victims, and Rose in *Råttfångerskan* keeps rats as pets. Disa Månsson's connection with the unconventional in Anna Jansson's *Stum siter guden* (2004) [Silent sits the god] is made explicit by her worship of Viking gods and the way in which she designs her murders according to Viking rites.

While the revenge narrative echoes the pattern of victim-turned-agent traceable for example in folk narratives (cf. Propp 1971) in which a traumatised hero sets forth to resolve a task set out for him, the narrative of the delusionist echoes

female specificity through associations with the negative female archetype of the evil woman in possession of knowledge beyond the rational, the witch. In both cases, the potential of the murderer to threaten social order becomes explicitly articulated: while the victim who metamorphoses into an agentive killer directs her criticism at the structures that maintain patriarchal power generative of violence against women, the delusionist is portrayed in terms of marginality as a character in possession of an unknowable destructive force equally capable of questioning social order. Both ways of putting the murdering woman into narrative emphasise her crossing of the boundaries of the intelligible and the accepted not only because she murders, but also because she does it for special reasons and in a special way.

### 3.2 Second Narrative: Murder in the Family

The family is conceptualised as a basic social institution both as regards economy and nurturing ('household' and 'generational relations', cf. Paajanen 2007). In order to survive, a family should be coherent, and this coherence is defined by togetherness and the economic power that maintains and regulates it. Particularly in classical crime fiction families were the most central settings for crime, and this tradition seems to continue in contemporary fiction: the discrepancy between a requirement of togetherness and the family's disfunctionality are generative of murder. The stories in which the murderer is a female family member are both narratives of economic power held by women and stories about relationships between women.

In some cases the requirement for belonging in a family may be so compelling that sustaining it requires violence. Typically, the claim for cohesion is endangered when the male head of the family is replaced by a woman. In Sara Paretsky's *Blacklist* (2003) the murderer is a formidable matriarch who kills to prevent the tarnishing of her family empire's reputation. She takes over the responsibility of the family's publishing house and becomes a murderer when the family's honour and economic power become endangered. In Peter Spiegelman's *Death's Little Helpers* (2005) the murderer protects her new family against the demands of father of her new partner's child by murdering him with the result that instead of sustaining the cohesion of the family, she breaks it.

In some novels murder takes place with the aim to do just this, to break the cohesion of the family. In Barbara Nadel's *Arabesk* (2001) economic power held by a

woman renders the family vulnerable for violence and disintegration. As in the well-known film *Bodyguard* (1992), the family's internal cohesion is gnawed away by economic dependence: the murderer is a family member who murders to question the status of her sister who holds economic power.

The decrease of family cohesion may also make it susceptible for violence from the outside. In Sue Grafton's *T is for Trespass* (2007) care and nurture for which female family members have traditionally been responsible for are outsourced and this creates an opportunity for a perverted professional specialised in killing old people is allowed to enter the family with the consequence that it is opened up for unexpected violence. Sue Grafton's novels have been regarded as feminist and the detective protagonist Kinsey Milhone has been interpreted as promoting emancipatory aims (Arvas 1997: 286–287). Regarding the murder case in *T is for Trespass* the situation is, however, different. In the novel, fractures in family cohesion render the family vulnerable, and this vulnerability is associated with women's right for careers outside the home.

### 3.3 Third Narrative: Devoted Lovers

Love and jealousy have at all times been motives for murders committed by women in crime fiction, and contemporary narratives do not make an exception. In these stories the murderer's pathological love leads to violence either against the object of this distorted affection, his or her rivals or merely an unlucky passer-by. In Barbara Nadel's *Arabesk* a dead eunuch proves to have been murdered by his jealous wife, and in Patricia Cornwell's *Blow Fly* (2003) a love relationship based on perverted dependence and exploitation turns a female accomplice of a wanton sexual murderer to a killer.

The stories in which love is the motive for murder describe the murderers as deranged psychopaths who dedicate themselves totally to their unilateral love. In Sue Grafton's *F is for Fugitive* (1993) the love story is based on irony; the disturbed murderer kills to protect the man she loves but condemns simultaneously her own innocent brother to jail. One-sided, perverted love and a vicious circle of manipulation, deceit and exploitation are presented as the motive in Val McDermid's *Trick of the Dark* (2010). The murderer, with her pathological dedication to her love is, in her delusional hubris, prepared to remove all obstacles that may come between herself and the woman she loves. Although being lesbian does not seem to hinder the economic and social success of the characters in the

novel, the homophobia and values that restrict sexuality in institutions that safeguard the stability of society – this time the university – are indicated as the fundamental structures that generate violence. The novel pays attention to the unifying requirement of such institutions to repress non-normative ways of ‘doing’ gender, to how repressed desire can lead to perversion and find expression in murder.

### 3.4 Fourth Narrative: The Dangerous Trickster Woman

The fourth narrative of violent women, female tricksters, is a story of murderers who engage explicitly in subversive action when making visible social injustice with their trickster performance based on violations of class, gender or other boundaries. In folklore, tricksters are constantly moving, boundary-breaking teasers who question social values and practices. Lori Landa (1998: 2) has described trickster figures as expressions of liminality, subversion, duality and irony which make good use of imitation, masquerade, theft and deceit. It is also typical for tricksters to engage in social criticism by making visible pretence and inequality by their questioning of social systems (Landa 1998: 2).

In Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2009/2006) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest* (2009/2007), a straight-forward victim-turned-avenger narrative structure is combined to the mobility, social criticism and resistance inherent in trickster figures. The female protagonist Lisbeth Salander does not acknowledge boundaries: she moves on the borderlines of the legal and the illegal and questions the ethics of society. She makes visible the patriarchal social structures that make possible oppression and exploitation as she simultaneously engages in resistance against them. The victim and revenge narratives are founded on her femininity, but she does not respect traditionally defined categories of gender and sexuality: she engages in a masquerade with surface expressions of gender as fluently as she moves between sexualities. She travels unhindered in virtual reality although socially and physically restricted by time and place. Her unbelievable endurance, physical and technical skills, her photographic memory and emotional reclusiveness reside between human and cyborg, realism and fantasy.

In Fredrik Ekelunds’s *Nina och sundet* the murderer tries the boundaries of gender, class and morality. She moves between countries, occupations and identities by staging her own death and being reborn in another country and another



language. She plays with sexuality and male desire: as a prostitute she places herself as an object of desire but as a murderer she is a subject with power. As with Salander, this narrative also displays the victim and trauma narratives which in the novel serve as the motive to kill representatives of high finance. Their economic power and the exploitation of people made possible by it are presented as the motives for the expression of class hatred by murdering.

In Joanne Harris's *Gentlemen and Players* (2005) class, gender and sexuality are at the centre. Being upper class and male guarantee a privileged position in British society, but can simultaneously prove as sources of vulnerability. The female protagonist who plays with identities infiltrates a public school for boys, an institution which typically reproduces the British class society, first by disguising as a pupil and later, as a teacher. A girl masked as a boy, she falls in love with one of the pupils and makes visible the homosexuality and homophobia present in the boys' school through heterosexual desire. At the same time, by trespassing in the secret world of the privileged, she proves that the arrogance of the British upper class and its self-evident assumption of its special status is simultaneously a weakness.

#### **4 Closure: Punishment or Acquittal**

In crime narratives finding out who committed the crime is important for a pleasurable reading experience. Whether the criminal is convicted is of secondary importance, but more often than not the narratives featuring women murderers seem to end in some form of acquittal of the murderer. Instead, these narratives invest in endings also recognizable in other stories of women who break against cultural norms (cf. Tuohimaa 1998: 57–58). The most common retribution for women murderers is death by suicide or occasionally an accident. Sometimes the murderers avoid being captured altogether and only in a small minority of the stories the violent woman is subjected to the hands of the penal institution. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (2009: 204) combine the question of retribution to the socially critical tendencies of contemporary crime fiction. These tendencies, brought about by generic change during the past thirty years, become visible in that society is in crime novels increasingly analysed and pointed out as the organism that on the one hand makes possible and promotes criminal activity, and on the other engages in a more or less futile effort to prevent it. In a society like this, the responsibility of the individual of her or his acts is questioned in the grip of the repressive social apparatus. When the murderer is a traumatised woman

whose violators the system has failed to stop, who is responsible? Avoidance of formal punishment can thus be read as a question clinging in the air about the justification of crime in compelling circumstances.

## 5 Conclusions

The four narratives of women murderers are both subversive and reactionary. Violence as such is not a constituent of femininity, and a woman who murders is already, by definition, a marginal figure marked by cultural specificity because of her improper way of being a woman. In crime fiction, however, the subversive receives the most pronounced expression in her doing of femininity against the grain by murdering for reasons and in ways that question patriarchy and the coercive social constraints and social institutions that maintain and reproduce patriarchal power.

At the same time, the reactionary in her narrative has to do with the victim-turned-agent structure that underlies the majority of stories featuring a violent woman. In crime fiction, women are regarded primarily as traumatised victims of male violence who kill for motives rising from woman-to-woman relationships. Moreover, when traumatised men turn into avengers, they tend to rise above the avenging status and become heroes with a universal message, while traumatized female avengers, despite their social critical concerns, remain as avengers dominated by female immanence.

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