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Sleuths and spies:

the Rise of the ‘Everywoman’ in detective and thriller fiction of the 1920s

ABSTRACT

The 1920s, frequently referred to as the ‘Roaring Twenties’ or the ‘Jazz Age’, are often associated with opulent lifestyles and the emergence of striking fashion and furniture trends. Themes in the history of women in crime and thriller fiction show, however, that this decade was also a difficult period in the West, one of widespread financial hardship and of living in the shadow of social turmoil: anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories and fear of the foreign dominated the mainstream press as well as popular fiction. It was also a period in which women were working to navigate their way through a society changed forever by the experience of war. This paper examines some of the well-known detective and thriller fiction writers of the 1920s – Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Buchan and William Le Queux – and shows how their characters chart the sexualisation of women as well as women’s resistance to the prevailing views of the day. Fictional women of this period represent ‘Everywoman’: independent and intelligent and, most importantly, sleuths and spies in their own right.

KEY WORDS

women in fiction
detective fiction
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everywoman
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INTRODUCTION

The 1920s, frequently referred to as the ‘Roaring Twenties’ or the ‘Jazz Age’, are often associated with opulent lifestyles and the emergence of striking fashion and furniture trends. Themes in the history of women in crime and thriller fiction show, however, that this decade was also a difficult period in the West, one of widespread financial hardship and of living in the shadow of social turmoil: anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories and fear of the foreign dominated the mainstream press as well as popular fiction. It was also a period in

which women were working to navigate their way through a society changed forever by the experience of war. This paper examines some of the well-known detective and thriller fiction writers of the 1920s – Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Buchan and William Le Queux – and shows how their characters chart the sexualisation of women as well as women’s resistance to the prevailing views of the day.

Heroines are truly heroic in many forms of fiction, especially in crime and thriller fiction. They are of course idealized and larger than life, but they are versions of their readers, understandable and acceptable. In other words, for their own time periods, they are Everywoman, an individual woman who in some way represents or symbolizes all women. Their qualities and appearance are those most admired, or most seen as admirable, in all women. This paper is an exploration of the ‘Everywoman’ in the 1920s, focusing on British authors including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Buchan, E. Phillips Oppenheim and others. We should point out that at this time the genres were still developing so the boundaries between detective and thriller, and thriller and spy thriller fiction, often appear blurred.

THE POLITICS OF THE 1920s

To understand our Everywoman, we need to understand the political background to the decade. The 1920s were hard times economically for most of the British population. Many demobilized soldiers returned home from the First World War to unemployment and poverty. There were strikes in the railways, the mines and the transport industries, amid fears of Bolshevism and Communist interference in British affairs (Andrew 1985: 233-238). In fiction, lower class characters were easily influenced by foreigners and anarchists to subvert and betray England by industrial unrest and sabotage.

The decade is often referred to as the ‘Roaring twenties’, the ‘Jazz Age’ or the ‘Gay twenties’, but only in discussing those who had money (Saltzman 2012: 5). In Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Lord Peter Views the Body* (1928), her aristocratic detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, accompanies his sister and her friend to the Soviet Club, where he is very uncomfortable with the décor, the company, and the food. The friend is poor and is described as having a heavy, ill-cut fringe – in other words, she cannot afford a good haircut, and is therefore a ‘Red’, or Communist. The reality for most women was much worse than not having a fashionable hairdo, and much more like Agatha Christie’s penniless, hungry and desperately job-seeking Prudence Cowley, better-known as Tuppence, in *The Secret Adversary*, first published in 1922, who says ‘Money, money, money! I think about money morning, noon and night!’

(1967:11).

Thrillers highlight a contemporary nostalgia for pre-war values, and give a depressing picture of British society and the divisions within it. Middle and upper-class British authors had little understanding of people from less privileged backgrounds or of those living in genteel poverty. The aristocratic Lionel, for example, expresses his contempt for women who wear laddered stockings, however well darned these may be, in William Le Queux's *Double Nought* (1927). Tuppence in *The Secret Adversary* has darned stockings, Miss Brown in E. Phillips Oppenheim's *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* (1927) has darned gloves: these subtle stitches of repair work indicate both their social class and their lack of money.

GENDER AND CLASS

There were gender as well as class divisions. Women had replaced men in the paid workforce during the war, to a limited extent (Caine 1997: 178-179). There were, for instance, women working in the intelligence services, some as code breakers (Proctor 2005: 455). Yet, their 'perceived ambitions for home and family made them ineligible for the demanding work of secrecy and diplomacy' (Proctor 2005: 456) and 'most were dismissed in 1919' (Proctor 2005: 462). The same prejudices impacted upon women's lives at all layers of society, whether they had families to support or not, and the dismissals applied to all wartime, and therefore temporary, employment (Caine 1997: 179). Working women were regarded as depriving men of jobs (Saltzman 2012: 50-51) and conditions became even more difficult at the end of the decade with the onset of the Great Depression. Married women were barred from professions such as teaching, the Civil Service and medicine from the early 1920s onwards (Horn 2010: 30; Caine 1997: 181). The post-war period in Britain was anti-feminist (Caine 1997: 181), although a number of Acts passed between 1922 and 1928 helped women, including the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act of 1928 which gave them the vote on the same terms as men.

The war continued to have an impact on every facet of life, one result being the high incidence of violence within marriages (Caine 1997: 180-181; Kent 2012: x). Men who had served in the armed forces, and who had been damaged mentally or physically by the horrors of their war experiences, were often antagonistic towards women (Caine 1997: 180-181). These men were also a constant and visible reminder of what had happened. We think immediately of Dorothy L. Sayers' shell-shocked Lord Peter Wimsey, the crippled ex-soldiers in John Buchan's *Huntingtower* (1922) and the blind Captain Shere in Ian Hay's *The Poor Gentleman* (1928). Women were expected to 'play a key role in the reconstruction of

masculinity' (Sharp 2011: 7), and the return of women to marriage, family, home, and 'the drudgery of post-war domesticity' (Sharp 2011: 7) 'formed a significant part of the culture of demobilisation after the war' (Rea 2011: 113).

Many women remained unmarried because of the post-war numerical imbalance of the sexes. Families were smaller (Caine 1997: 182), so women had more leisure. Women at home, trapped and with time to themselves, were readers of fiction, especially detective fiction (Horn 2010: 205-206; Sigel 2012: 30, 81), through which they vicariously experienced fast cars, dinners at the Ritz, country house society, excitement, adventure, mystery, and romance. They saw themselves in fictional heroines, but they also saw male ideas of the ideal woman. The below attempts to explore just what did they see, and why.

Male writers like Buchan, Oppenheim, Le Queux and Hay, and their fictional heroes, were of the 'class and sex that ruled Britain' (Stafford 1988: 214). They expressed the contemporary belief in women as nurturers and home-makers, and in 'marriage as a stabilising social force' (Sharp 2011:7). Women in this fiction are portrayed as childish. They need to be looked after, or to be rescued from peril by the hero. They are undemanding, and may be helpless victims of circumstance, like the hero's mother in Emerson Hambrook's *The Red Tomorrow* (1920) who sank into infamy and shame as a result of poverty.

THE RISE (AND RISE) OF THE 'EVERYWOMAN' IN THE 1920s

There were few women as major characters in crime and thriller fiction at the beginning of the decade. There were some: and these are strong women, like Mary Hannay in *The Three Hostages* (1924) and Tuppence Cowley in *The Secret Adversary*, whose wartime experiences gave them temporary male status. Like Edith Brown in *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* (1927), their character and actions hark back to the comradeship of the trenches (Kent 2012: 101, 103) and the idealism of the war. In *The Return of Clubfoot*, by Valentine Williams (1927), the hero Desmond Okewood of the Secret Service meets Marjorie Garth, who had served at the Front during the war, and they fall in love. Marjorie explains that she has only once been happy, despite her wealthy background, and that was when she was with the Army in France: 'I loved the romance, the adventure of it all, the good comradeship not only between the women but also between the men and the women' (Williams 1927: 104).

Women comrades have similar experiences to their men, even if the wars they are fighting in are different. In the last story in William Le Queux's *The Luck of the Secret Service* (1921), the hero Claud is helped by his fiancée, Myrtle, who accompanies him into Russia: 'Though she knew our peril should we be discovered, yet she acted with a

fearlessness born of a sterling patriotism and love of her own land [...]. She was, I saw, prepared to sacrifice her liberty – nay, even her life – in order to assist me and serve her country' (Le Queux 1921: 111). Sonia and Paulia, the Russian girls in Edgar Jepson's delightful story *A Prince in Petrograd* (1921) know, as the hero Edward Morton does, about revolution, fighting, death, destruction and hardship.

Later in the decade we have another sort of female comrade, Oppenheim's charming Miss Brown in *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* A chance encounter in a London fog transports her into a new world of excitement, drama, emotions, and secret service work. She is described in the first few pages as respectable, composed, observant, patient, unafraid, and demure, but with an un-probed spirit of romance. These are obviously ideal feminine qualities. Like Tuppence, she is shabby, but always neat and ladylike. Her boss, Colonel Dessiter of X.Y.O., has little opinion of most women: he makes use of them, drinks with and flirts with them, and sometimes learns what he wants from them. Miss Brown, however, is uncritical and submissive, follows orders without question, and is idealistic, brave and supportive, and he falls in love with her.

Agents like Dessiter and Somerset Maugham's Ashenden 'moved in a man's world in which women were always a threat' (Stafford 1988: 214). In a story called 'The City of Evil' in *The Luck of the Secret Service* by William Le Queux, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs says to the hero Claud that: 'You young fellows in the Foreign Office Service are often far too prone to fall beneath petticoat influence.' Claud laughs and declares 'that my late father had always instilled into me the greatest caution where women were concerned' (Le Queux 1921: 3).

Feminine guile of 'a hostile kind was so cunning and devious that men were defenceless' (Stafford 1988: 214). Women were seen as temptresses, especially foreign, un-English women like the villainess Irma in Herman C. McNeile's (Sapper's) *Bulldog Drummond* books. 'The Story of a Hushed-up Affair', in William Le Queux's *In Secret* (1920) has a Russian character. She is a beautiful woman to whom Le Queux is attracted, but she is later revealed as an anarchist. And, again in 'The City of Evil' in his *The Luck of the Secret Service*, there is a beautiful woman who is known to send the Bolsheviks all sorts of information that she picks up at the Embassies in London. Anne Beddingfeld, the narrator and heroine in Agatha Christie's *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), produces a first page that is dedicated to the 'bizarre décor' which surrounds the Russian dancer with 'narrow black eyes'. 'Feminine guile of a friendly sort weakened the resolve needed by agents to carry out their patriotic duty' (Stafford 1988: 214). Ashenden, for instance, is distracted by the exotic

and demanding Anastasia Alexandrovna in Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden; or, The British Agent* (1928).

Even Agatha Christie's *The Secret Adversary* reinforced the stereotypical views of women. Christie based the character of Tuppence on her own beliefs and experiences (Gill 1991: 21). She, like her heroine, was a nurse in an officers' hospital for a short time, and fell in love with her first husband as suddenly as Julius falls in love with Jane in the romantic subplot. Tuppence herself is the daughter of a clergyman and, like Anne Beddingfeld of Christie's *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), she is a member of the respectable middle class. Tuppence had been a general's driver as well as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse. She wears short skirts, smokes cigarettes, and dresses as smartly as she can. She has character, and charm. She is independent, and makes affirming statements like: 'Little Tuppence can look after herself' (Christie 1967: 15), but after many adventures she finally realises that she is in love with the hero Tommy, as he is with her, and wants nothing more than to create a home for him. Both she and Tommy think that marriage will be a sport, as Tommy says:

'And a damned good sport too.' (Christie 1967: 221).

This theme of ideal women being good sports is important. John Buchan's most revealing comment about his character Mary in *The Three Hostages* (1924) is that she is a 'thorough sportsman' (Buchan 1924: 226). Mary, an intelligence agent in Buchan's 1919 novel, *Mr Standfast*, is married to Richard Hannay in this, the next book in the series. She is described as having a 'soft and gentle face' (Buchan 1924: 207), but she is 'unafraid of anything' (Buchan 1924: 11), insists on joining in the search for the hostages, and threatens the villain with acid burns.

The fashionably flat-chested look of the early 1920s emphasised the ideal of the slim, boyish woman. Marjorie Garth has 'slim straight limbs' (Williams 1927: 230), and one 'might have taken her for a boy' (Williams 1927: 250). John Buchan's Saskia in *Huntingtower* is also described as boyish. She is a patriot, brave and beautiful, but a girl or child rather than a woman. Edith Brown is described as having: 'That curious air of composure, childlike in its perfect naturalness' in *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* (Oppenheim 1927: 311), and Bulldog Drummond addresses his Phyllis as 'little girl' (McNeile 1920: 151).

THRILLING HEROES

The character of Tommy in *The Secret Adversary* brings out the plight of the returned

soldier/officer, now looking desperately for employment. He is a patriotic Englishman, with no marketable skills besides being capable, honest, and 'unmistakably a gentleman and a sportsman' (Christie 1967: 8). Tommy is unwilling to discuss his wartime experiences but these prove useful: he is handy with his fists, and he recognises the character 'Mr Carter' from his own experiences in Army Intelligence. He symbolises the qualities of the ideal Englishman, at his best in a tight place.

The majority of thriller heroes of the 1920s, like Barry Shere, Bulldog Drummond, Richard Hannay and Peter Wimsey, were gentlemen. They had all served in the war. Bulldog Drummond was just one of the ex-officer heroes who could call on his own secret army of all ranks for support. The blind Barry Shere needs the help of Alf, the unemployed ex-soldier, in Ian Hay's *The Poor Gentleman*, and Lord Peter Wimsey has ex-Sergeant Bunter. Dessiter's title of Colonel in Oppenheim's *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* is also a reminder of wartime action. Hannay had been a Major-General, Peter Wimsey a Major, Drummond and Shere both Captains. With such emphasis on heroes and their war service, we can see why it was important for the heroines to have been involved as well.

These men were privileged, as were real agents (Proctor 2005: 451), and they had privileged access to information. In sharp contrast to their women, they were not men alone – they were supported by their class system and networks, able to call on friends and the law for immediate support. Their often criminal behaviour was forgiven. They were usually amateurs, because professional spying was still not a game for gentlemen, and they were usually unmarried, and usually wealthy. There are occasional professionals, like Ashenden, and like Dessiter, though he and Miss Brown retire from secret service work at the end of *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.*

THRILLING VILLAINS

Villains also had a central role to play. Indeed, the thrillers of the 1920s were – as were many detective novels which reflected broader, national themes – based on fear or external threats; fear of new scientific horrors and war machines, as in McNeile's *The Final Count* (1926) or of conspiracies and revolutions against established democracies, as in John Buchan's *The Three Hostages* and E. Phillips Oppenheim's *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* Emerson Hambrook's hero in *The Red Tomorrow*, like many lower-class men, saw a Red revolution as a release from working-class poverty and hopelessness. Contemporary fiction reflected the times, as always. There was some nasty anti-Semitism in many of these books, and fiction illustrates the fear of aliens. William Le Queux, for instance, peppers his books with descriptions of

over-dressed foreign women and beetle-browed, swarthy foreigners.

Diplomatic relations between Britain and Russia ceased from 1917 to 1924, and evil Bolsheviks were everywhere in new thriller fiction by 1922. Russians or Bolsheviks made splendid, easily recognised villains. They are stereotypical fellows who collapse under pressure. They are no match, for instance, for 12-year-old Peter, the hero of Edgar Jepson's *Peter Intervenes* (1926), who becomes involved by chance in plots revolving round Bolshevik attempts to steal jewels so that they can set the Red revolution in process. They were often described as being physically repulsive. Everything about Serge Nikolaivitchin *Peter Intervenes* is scrawny, including his very dirty hands, his dull black eyes with their scrawny sockets, and his straggling beard. The word 'Communist', when used to describe a fictional character in the 1920s, was a term of denigration.

Miss Brown of X.Y.O. has a background of the general strike of 1926 and the Communist Party's financial support of the unions involved. *The Secret Adversary* is based on the founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 when Bolshevik money poured into Britain and supported labour unrest. The menace of Communism was also behind the Bulldog Drummond adventures. In *Huntingtower*, Saskia, the aristocratic Russian émigré and fugitive heroine, is pursued by Bolsheviks. Books like these reassure their readers that all is well with England, and that Good will always triumph over Evil.

CONCLUSION

The 1920s Everywoman was a comrade, and, like Mary Hannay, Miss Brown, Myrtle, Phyllis and Tuppence, equal partners in thriller fiction adventures. She was married, like Mary, or hoping to be married, like Tuppence. She was a homemaker, but natural and boyish. She was beautiful like Mary, Saskia and Phyllis, smart and charming like Tuppence, undaunted by adversity, like Sonia and Paulia, slim and dainty and loyal and trustworthy like Edith Brown. All brave and intelligent, all adventurous, all idealistic, all with spirit, and like Mary Hannay and Tuppence, they are all good sportsmen: in other words, like their ideal men, they understand the British notion of fair play.

Male thriller heroes in the 1920s have more physical roles than the women, and they have the confidence based on superiority of education and wealth. They proved themselves in the war, and remain prepared to die for their ideals and their country. They are leaders, but the women in *The Secret Adversary*, the Bulldog Drummond adventures, *Huntingtower* and *The Three Hostages*, and *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.*, are strong in their own right. They are also prepared to sacrifice themselves. They are capable, courageous, and intelligent, and in each

case, they have the initiative to take essential and separate roles in the investigations.

Many of these books have been in print for ninety years. We believe that it is their political backgrounds, and their women characters, that provide some of the enduring appeal of these works. Politics was (and is still) everything. More importantly, however, fictional women of this period represent the 'Everywoman': independent and intelligent and, most of all, sleuths and spies in their own right.

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