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POLICE LITERATURE IN THE FEMININE

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« My dear reader, it seems that this book is a police novel. A few months ago, I read an article which pronounced a verdict, that there exists two categories of novels: popular detective or adventure stories (described by the reviewer as cheap fictional prose) on one side and on the other, literary novels. I have tried to understand what « literary novels » means. According to the French Littré's dictionary, « literary » pertains to belles-lettres which embraces notions of grammar, eloquence and poetry. The specific sense of these words will not allow defining mysterious literary quality. Would a costly sale value be the main factor to classify a novel as a literary one? Better stop teasing the critic and try to understand what he really attempted to express with so weak an expression: literary novels are good novels while the others are not. Hence, police stories are not the proper genre.

So, tell me why the greatest minds take pleasure in reading them?

In « *La Double Mort De Frédéric Belot* » (Frédéric Belot's Double Death) by Claude Aveline (French, 1901-1992)

The status of the police story attributed either to minor literary works or to literature has been recurrently mentioned since the creation of the genre. Robert Deleuse (French, born 1950) demonstrated brightly in « *Gloses de Style* » (Glossaries of Styles), the differentiation expressed by critics between police novel authors and literary writers (refer to « *Bulletin Des Polarophiles Tranquilles N°3* »). This issue seems to re-emerge in an exaggerated manner when it concerns police stories written by female novelists. As a matter of fact, if feminine authors have been present, not to say omnipresent right from the first steps of this specialty, we have to recognize that critics have either underestimated their contribution or silenced their creations.

The main contributors are:

Clara **Reeve** (English, 1729-1807) with « *The Old English Baron, A Gothic Story* », 1778.

Ann **Radcliff** (English, 1764-1823) with « *The Castle Of Athlin And Dunbayne, A Highland Story* », 1789, « *A Sicilian Romance* » 1790, « *The Romance Of The Forest* » 1791, « *The Mysteries Of Udolpho* » , 1794, « *The Italian, Or The Confessional Of The Black Penitents* » 1797

Sophia (English, 1750-1824) and her sister Harriet (1757-1851) **Lee** with « *Canterbury Tales* » completed in 1805

Mary **Shelley** (British, 1797-1851) with « *Frankenstein* », 1818

Anna Katherine **Green** (American, 1846-1935) with « *The Leavenworth Case* », 1878, « *The Golden Slipper and Other Problems* », 1915, etc...

Emmuska **Orczy** (British, 1865-1947) with « *The Old Man in the Corner* », 1901

Mary Roberts **Rinehart** (American, 1876-1958) with « *The Circular Staircase* », 1908, « *The Window at the White Cat* », 1910 etc...

In « *Litterature Policière Et Rapports Sociaux De Sexe* » , 1997, (Police Literature and social terms between sexual groups), Danielle Charest (Canadian, born 1951) proposes a study on the acceptance of the feminine mystery texts based on about twenty specialized works. She observes that critics classify male novelists in essential, major or minor authors, while female ones are either essential or minor. This implies that there are no major female novelists. For example, a pioneer of the genre, Anna Katherine Green, is the symbol of this practice considering that most historians and theoreticians silence even her name.

When Sara Parestky (American, born 1947) created « *Sisters in Crime* » in 1986 as a pressure group within the prestigious association « *Mystery Writers of America* », she had probably been led by the same concern related to the recognition of feminine writings. Considering that 40% of the yearly production of criminal stories is signed by women, the members of the group orchestrated a large promotional campaign with bookshops and libraries. Today, the results seem to go beyond their expectations for police publications written by women have proliferated. Some figures have been released by Willetta L. Heising (American) in « *Detecting Women 2* » (Agatha award 1996): nine hundred and sixty books were written by female authors from 1878 to 1969, one thousand and eighty between 1970 and 1989 and no less than two thousand and four hundred from 1990 to 2000.

While in the past, they were ignored by critics, they are now favourably reviewed by the press and are no longer excluded from awards or other recognitions. During the years 1980-1990 and because of the massive presence of criminal fictions published by female authors from all countries, it seems that critics have adopted a new approach. In « *Les Maîtres Du Roman Policier* », 1991, (The masters of Police Novels), Robert Deleuse stipulates that « we cannot say that feminine crime fiction has enjoyed a high rating with the

specialists. Most of the time forgotten, many authors deserve better than the silence which used to be their share. All the more, could we ask ourselves if Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley and some others had been missing from the scene, could crime fiction and later the roman noir have been what they became? On July 11, 1997, Michel Abescat (French journalist and critic) wrote as the headlines in the French daily paper «Le Monde » : *since the beginning, the detective story is also written in the feminine*. On the other hand, François Rivière (French, born 1949, journalist and novelist) specifies: « *The first major author is Edgar Poe (American, 1809-1849). The next one is an American woman Anna Katharine Green (1846-1935) who, at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote novels set among the judicial circle and created the first female detective characters. Then followed Mary Roberts Rinehart (American, 1876-1958), [...] who, with « The Circular Staircase », 1908, invented suspense in a story where a young girl is endangered in an old house.*

Currently, articles and notes abound about police novels and feminine authors. Let's cite the works by Michel Amelin, François Rivière as well as feminine essays (sometimes feminist) mainly those by Danielle Charest, Nicole Décuré, Martha Hailey Dubose (« *Women in Mystery, The Lives and works of Notable Women Crime Novelists* », 2000), Suzanne Dutruch, Deborah Eileen Hamilton and Kathleen Gregory Klein.

The latest referential publications, guides, anthologies and dictionaries devoted to criminal books take feminine novels into account. In order to continue the study performed by Danielle Charest, let's consider three opuses published after the release of her essay: « *Le Polar* », 2001 (Crime fictions Guide) by Jacques Baudou (French, born 1946) with Jacques Schleret (French), « *La Litterature Policière* », 2003 (Police Literature) by Claude Aziza (French academic) with Anne Rey and « *Le Dictionnaire Des Litteratures Policières* », 2003 (Police Literature Dictionary) directed by Claude Mesplède (French, born 1939). In each of these essays, let's content ourselves with the search for the place granted to the most famous female precursors, that is to say Anna Katharine Green, Baroness Orczy and Mary Roberts Rinehart. If they do appear in « *Le Polar* » and in « *Le Dictionnaire des litteratures Policières* », none are mentioned in « *La Litterature Policière* ».

It seems that the process of acknowledging the role historically played by women has unquestionably begun. Nevertheless, some reluctance and resistance still survives for we have not found the names of some pioneers like Caroline Archer Clive (British, 1801-1872), Ellen Price Wood (British, 1814-1887), Metta Victoria Fuller Victor (American, 1831-1885) and Catherina Louisa Pirkis (British, 1841-1910). However with « *Paul Ferrol, a Tale* », Caroline Archer Clive prefigured in 1855 together the roman noir in letting the criminal hero be known by the reader at the beginning of the novel and the suspense technique because the main character is unknown of the others. Ellen Price Wood had a big hit with « *East Lynne* », 1860/61: more than a million copies were sold. In 1867, Metta Victoria Fuller Victor was the first American woman to publish an infancy kind of detective novel « *The Dead Letter: An American Romance* ». As far as Catherina Louisa Pirkis is concerned, she published in 1894 « *The Experience Of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* » featuring the first female professional detective character.

Briefly, let's review the female contribution to police literature. It is Anna Katherine Green who created the term «detective story ». Feminine novelists are the ones who first set up the principles of police detection and defined the explicit and implicit rules. Mary Elizabeth Braddon (British, 1837-1915) introduced the structure of the inverted story with the sensation novel « *Lady Audley's Secret* », 1861. Anna Katherine Green put in place the various steps of the police procedure (expert reports, map of the crime scene, list of the various hypothesis), multiplied the investigations and points of view with the intention to put the reader, who is expecting to find out the truth, off the track. This truth will be revealed with the public confession of the murderer. As for Dorothy L. Sayers (British, 1893-1967), while she participated with her prefaces to the codification of the « Whodunit » genre, her rival Dame Agatha Christie (British, 1890-1976) generalized the compression of the spatiotemporal frame and the number of characters but amplified the sum of indices, alibis and wrong tracks. Also, note that the first book about the police novel creation « *The Technique of the*

Mystery Story » was written by Carolyn Wells in 1913.

As far as the French authors are concerned, Miriam Dou, Camille Hedwige, Antoinette Soulas, Laurence Auriol, Catherine Arley, Hélène de Monaghan, Janine Le Fauconnier, Fred Vargas (born 1957), Estelle Monbrun etc...all have built detective stories specifically related to France.

From Mary Roberts Rinehart to Dame Agatha Christie (according to Winston Churchill, she is the only woman for whom crime has paid), From P.D. James (British, born 1920) to Ruth Rendell (British, born 1930), Patricia Cornwell (American, born 1956), Mary Higgins Clark (American, born 1927), Elisabeth George (American, born 1949), Fred Vargas etc... all these ladies of crime stories, crowned with success, have unquestionably popularized police literature. They have also given a fresh impulsion to renew the genre either in deviating from the norms and from tacit conventions (see « *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* » by Dame Agatha Christie) or in creating new forms, second rate fictions and trends. If Mary Robert Rinehart was the originator of the suspense technique, Patricia Highsmith (American, 1921-1995) introduced the psychological, even psychopathologic realism in « *Strangers in a Train* », 1950. In 1966, Lilian Jackson Braun (American, born 1913 or 16,) initialized the wildlife police novel with « *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards* ». With the first opus of « *Brother Cadfael* » Ellis Peters (British, 1913-1995) launched the historical police story in 1977. Finally, in 1982, Sara Paretsky (American, born 1947) and Sue Grafton (American, born 1940) made a start on the American « Hard-Boiled » (unsentimental portrayal of crime) to feminized it. At their instigation, they have given rise to some new characteristics such as roman noirs signed by lesbian or coloured women.

If some, like Dorothy L. Sayers campaigned for the recognition of this literary genre, if Sara Paretsky and the « Sister In Crime » support and promote female authors who write mysteries, some others like Patricia Highsmith, Fred Vargas, Carmen Posadas (Uruguayan, born 1953), Hélène G. Couturier ride the line of the crests between literature and minor literary works as mentioned by Boileau (French, 1906-1989) and Narcejac (French, 1908-1998) who have thus given letters of patent nobility to crime novels. With these words, we thank them all.