



Pistols and Petticoats: 175 Years of Lady Detectives in Fact and Fiction

Erika Janik

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A lively exploration of the struggles faced by women in law enforcement and mystery fiction for the past 175 years

In 1910, Alice Wells took the oath to join the all-male Los Angeles Police Department. She wore no uniform, carried no weapon, and kept her badge stuffed in her pocketbook. She wasn't the first or only policewoman, but she became the movement's most visible voice.

Police work from its very beginning was considered a male domain, far too dangerous and rough for a respectable woman to even contemplate doing, much less take on as a profession. A policewoman worked outside the home, walking dangerous city streets late at night to confront burglars, drunks, scam artists, and prostitutes. To solve crimes, she observed, collected evidence, and used reason and logic—traits typically associated with men. And most controversially of all, she had a purpose separate from her husband, children, and home. Women who donned the badge faced harassment and discrimination. It would take more than seventy years for women to enter the force as full-fledged officers.

Yet within the covers of popular fiction, women not only wrote mysteries but also created female characters that handily solved crimes. Smart, independent, and courageous, these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female sleuths (including a healthy number created by male writers) set the stage for Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, as well as TV detectives such as *Prime Suspect*'s Jane Tennison and *Law and Order*'s Olivia Benson. The authors were not amateurs dabbling in detection but professional writers who helped define the genre and competed with men, often to greater success.

Pistols and Petticoats tells the story of women's very early place in crime fiction and their public crusade to transform policing. Whether real or fictional, investigating women were nearly always at odds with society. Most women refused to let that stop them, paving the way to a modern professional life for women on the force and in popular culture.

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