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Revealing Her Voice: The Impact of an Author's Gender on Psychological Crime Thrillers
Continued Reception in Fiction

“Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will, your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions” (Christie). Just as Agatha Christie’s, “And Then There Were None,” dissects the actions that reveal one’s soul in its novel, the actions of the authors who write these thrillers are also terribly revealing towards the soul of the genre and the trends that continue today. So, what are these trends, and why do thrillers specifically have such a strong reception, if they are often dark assessments of the human condition? What literary techniques in this genre remain crucial for the genre's success? Or does the writer have more to do with it than the content?

While space for women’s writing in the thriller genre has become commonplace today, historically men have dominated the industry, leaving the female experience subject to simply participating as a victim in the narrative which is often exposed to violence-based actions in the plot, rather than as the necessary active participant in the presence of the story as an author (O’Malley, 70). However, today the trends are in favor of female authorship, so this begs the question, what makes the genre so receptive today, if not for the female voices that now dominate the industry? What role does the author’s gender play in the genre’s continued popularity or does the literary techniques of the genre remain the most important over that of the author’s identity? This thesis aims to assess the influence that female authors have on the

genre, specifically psychological crime thrillers, and how this influence may or may not benefit the reception of the genre as trends continue to favor the genre in the literature. This analysis will assess how much of the reception is content versus the author's gender identity and whether the gender or identities of the authors themselves are essential to the crucial makeup of a strong thriller or if the story alone holds the most influence.

In recent discussions of the thriller genre, a controversial issue has been whether psychological thrillers are the driving force for captivating readership compared to other subgenres such as mystery novels. On the one hand, some argue that female writers are stronger at expressing psychological thrillers than male writers due to the argument that they are better natural observers of detail from a psychological point of view. From this perspective, we can see that female psychology argues in favor of female perspective writing and understanding in terms of creating detail in novels based on the innate ability to multitask and view observations differently from men and the way they think. On the other hand, however, others argue that gender does not play a role in the genre, but that simply strong writing techniques create these outcomes of high readership popular today.

In the words of Silvan Tomkin's research, the science and psychology behind drive, excitement, and arousal, both sexual and nonsexual in human nature are driven by physical responses in the body in tandem with mental signals (Tomkin). Tomkin has determined that human beings because of this natural arousal have an innate psychological draw toward the unknown. This concludes that human beings therefore have an innate desire to solve or resolve unresolved mysteries or problems, such as those found in thrillers, due to this natural arousal found psychologically, which has been the main factor for the genre's continued popularity from the past to the present since humanity's innate desires have not changed in our existence. The

research also notes that gender does play a role in humanities innate desire to resolve unsolved suspense-thrilling narratives, and from a gender perspective, women are more in tune with this drive than men due to their approach which differs from men, where they try to find answers from multiple perspectives, rather than compartmentalizing actions as men often do (Tomkin, 342). One of this view's main proponents studied by William James in his theory of emotions, "A variety of characteristics can be found in a single individual. They are subconscious elements that compose the scattered elements of a personality" (Cohen, 26). According to this view, emotions are driven by physical and psychological reactions and not the other way around. In sum, then, the issue is whether the drive of emotions is different by gender or the same.

My view is that although both men and women are equally valuable in the canon, the rise of female dominance in the genre is important to the stories told if society wishes to continue toward gender equality and the rise in strong suspense narratives for which women are uniquely naturally geared to create. Though I concede that many successful and necessary male authors such as Stephen King, among others are necessary for psychological thrillers, and that the most diverse voices are the most important, I still maintain that gender plays a partial role in the success of thrillers in the canon to present day and the high readership. For example, Agatha Christie's many novels remain the most-read thrillers not only from the date of their origins but to the present day. Although some might object that suspense and the strength of the writing matter more than the authors themselves, I would reply that hearing the voice of the voiceless or of those whose demographics are undervalued historically and in our society are that much more important in the thriller genre, because the genre is essential to highlight the conflicts that remain in society to motivate change and impose questions for readers to influence their understanding of society. The issue is important because fiction has the responsibility, even if it is not reality, to

reflect the world in which we live, to impose important ideals of society to reflect positive change. Noting the trends of gender in the genre helps to articulate the rise of equality, the multivalued voices in literature, and the continued evolution of one of the most popular genres, so that humanity can continue to use its innate desire to solve mysteries and expand it to desire to create a better world.

The thriller genre reveals the very psychology of the human condition which continues to bring in readership historically through the present era. For fiction to be considered a thriller, it must have several intentional elements. According to the *Library Journal*, “A thriller has to have strong characters, but the plot must introduce high stakes and conflict mixed with an emotional resonance” (Ayres). The mystery thriller genre is one of the most popular book genres in the publishing world (Frank, 133). People are driven toward psychological thrillers for several reasons, but the most notable is the suspense that stirs emotions for readers, the adrenaline evoked from the suspense, the twist of a well-written and often complex plot, and the strong character development which drives the understanding of human nature through the narratives examination of the character’s actions. The ability for readers to make predictions through the hints depicted in a thriller, and the psychological arousal often driven by the ability of the reader to be an active participant in the narrative as the plot unfolds create a strong reception to read the genre known today.

As the double peer-reviewed paper by Rachel Franks suggests, “Crime fiction started to gain popularity in the 18th century, which dramatically increased by the 19th century. Where, today, crime fiction is the most popular form of fiction with almost one in every three new books published in English falling into the crime fiction category” (Franks, 133). This popularity is notable as the genre’s origins date back from passages in the Old Testament when Cain is

condemned for murdering Abel (Genesis: 5-11) to *Oedipus the King*, a play first performed around 430BC' (Scaggs 2005, 9-11) to the groundbreaking stories of Edgar Allen Poe in the mid-18th century. (Frank 133). Thrillers specifically tend to be action-packed, page-turners with moments full of tension, anxiety, and fear. Without fail, they are plot-driven stories with plenty of plot twists that often create suspense for readers.

Among the most notable authors, the most famous female writer in the genre remains to be Agatha Christie. Agatha was born in Torquay in 1890, where she later became, and remains, the best-selling novelist of all time. Agatha Christie is best known for her 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections, as well as the world's longest-running play – *The Mousetrap*. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English and in translation. She was a writer, traveler, playwright, mother, wife, and surfer during her lifetime, for which her works became classics in the canon as readers know them today (About Agatha Christie). Of Christie's incredibly full life of travel, early work as a nurse, later writing, and family trials and tribulations across her biography, what was most notable to the relevance of the genre is the influence of female writers in Christie's life. According to the research of Jamie Aronson, "At an early age, Christie was exposed to the literary mystery genre. Her mother, a writer, would tell her mystery stories before bed." It was later noted that her sister was also a writer and that both Christie's mother and sister encouraged her writing in her youth, as she was homeschooled. It is also important to note that Christie learned to read before she was five years old. When Christie began writing mystery stories after becoming an adult, the women in her life were the source of her earliest supporters (Aronson).

Today most psychological crime novels are written by women, and most of which have their novels expanded into film and television mediums as the works grew in popularity. Authors

and notable works in the canon include *Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins, *And Then There Was None*, *The ABC Murders*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, by Agatha Christie, Emma Lathen's *Murder Against the Grain*, *American Spy* by Lauren Wilkinson, *Sharp Objects*, *Gone Girl*, and *Dark Places* by Gillian Flynn, "The Good Girl" by Mary Kubica. Daisy Johnson's "Sisters", "The Shining Girls" by Lauren Beukes, *In the Woods* by Tana French, *The Gathering* by Anne Enright, and so many more.

In Agatha's stories, *And Then There Were None*, *The ABC Murders*, and *Murder on the Orient Express*, for instance, Agatha, as seen in the rest of her collective works, provides a similar formula for her narratives to keep suspense heightened and provide captivating narratives for readers to cling to within the genre of the thriller novel, even with its mystery origins. Mac Alexandar's scholarly analysis of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, for instance, notes that the structure and the character-reader relationship curated by Christie are semi-formulaic and intentionally manipulative in its withholding of clues to provide a captivating suspenseful narrative most effectively. Her use of persuasive rhetoric formats, such as Rhetorical Structure Theory, in her mystery novels helps to reiterate the attention to detail often found as the pattern by female thriller authors such as Christie. Her work helps to produce plots no matter how complex or far-fetched, for which her audience remains receptive, due to the established fiction created by the author, to follow the suspense of the plot which helps to keep readers engaged.

For example, according to Alexandar's observations, over the many novels and short stories Agatha Christie wrote, there is often a similar structure. First, a murder is committed, the detective is called in (or is frequently already present), the detective analyses the evidence, interviews witnesses and suspects, and then almost always reveals the eventual solution in a

dénouement with the interested parties and suspects present. Finally, the murderer often confesses in the presence of all the assembled witnesses that the detective was correct, giving background information and endorsement to the detective's reasoning. The murderer is usually in awe of the detective for working out the 'impossible' solution, as indeed the reader is intended to be. A key observation about Christie is that although scrupulous with the placement of such clues, she fully intends the reader to be in the dark until the detective points the way, and a great deal of the pleasure to be found in reading the stories is derived from this final dénouement" (Alexandar, 14). Essentially it is the act of withholding details in the plot for readers to play an active role, that the narrative remains gripping, and helps to better understand why her work remains so popular historically and, in the canon, as we know it today (Alexandar, 25),

According to the peer-reviewed research studies published by female authors across 100 topics attract between 2% and 6% more undergraduate student readers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Spain than do articles by male authors (Woolston, 126). The report comes from the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, which used the computer program, Mendeley, to analyze the data the author collected reader data from these four countries plus India in 2014 for articles in 100 subject categories (M. Thelwall J. Altmeter. 1, 3; 2018). The findings concluded that female authors may have an unrecognized effect on students' education. The study's results caution early-career scientists, particularly female researchers, to look beyond citations for evidence that their research might have a broader impact than that metric alone indicates.

Another research study, conducted as part of the 'Role of publication-related biases in ecology' by a working group supported by the National Center for Ecological Analysis at the University of California found further research that indicates gender-influential authorship in

literature. According to Amber E. Budden and her associates, a double-blind review favors increased representation of female authors. The University of California did a case study, a double-blind peer review, in which neither author nor reviewer identity is revealed, and is rarely practiced in ecology or evolution journals. However, the double-blind review was introduced by the journal *Behavioral Ecology*, which found there was a “significant increase in female first-authored papers, a pattern not observed in a very similar journal that provides reviewers with author information. No negative effects could be identified, suggesting that the desire and need for female authorship is tenfold” (Budden, 4).

With these case studies and statistical analyses in academics and the sciences indicating the popularity and preference for female authorship, it can be determined that it is not a stretch then, that fictional genres, such as those of the thriller genre, would benefit from the current trend for female-driven authorship. If the double-blind test, which allows for zero biases of the genders, prefers the written and analytical style of female authors, then what is to say that readers of fiction, if given a similar double-blind test, would not also prefer the female author's style, such as that of Agatha Christie, say over male writers of the genre such as Stephen King? There is a likely correlation between this preference, also given the data that women are the dominant publishers of psychological crime thrillers today. So, what does this mean for the genre, if women dominate the genre over that of men, what message does this send from the perspective of the readership and society holistically?

In the *New African*, a scholarly article, an interview was conducted with Oyinkan Braithwaite on her debut thriller novel titled *My Sister, the Serial Killer* which won her a Staunch Book Prize. This interview helps to highlight the waves of change that continue for the genre and aids in highlighting the relevant exploitations of gender inequality that remain

prevalent despite the popularity of thrillers today. The award Braithwaite won, for instance, is a prize that is given to a novel in the thriller genre “where no woman is beaten, stalked, sexually exploited, raped or murdered.” O’Malley writes that in the wake of the #metoo movement, a “significant noise arose in the publishing world highlighting the fact that so many thriller and crime books typically present clichéd stories depicting hyper-sexualized women as helpless victims - thus reinforcing gender discrimination, hierarchies between the sexes, and archaic patriarchal power dynamics” (O’Malley, 70). Works such as Braithwaite’s help to divert the oppression of women, and aid in restructuring the commonplace practice of violence against women in this genre by telling a narrative that does the opposite, in hopes of highlighting the issues still facing the genre and society.

Female writers are essential for this redirection in the genre since women are more directly impacted by gender discrimination. Thriller novels such as Braithwaite, therefore, remain at the forefront of female authors’ minds which help to initiate change, whereas highlighting gender equality in the genre is less prevalent with male authors, whose experience with gender inequality is less direct typically than that of women. This author is a key example of why the genre has remained popular among female authors, and why readers remain in preference to female writers, although it must be stated that just because an author is male, their work is not inherently oppressive. However, the rise in female authors in psychological thrillers and works that offer such prizes that don’t further instigate violence only highlights how far society still must go in terms of creating an equal society for the genders, including in the literary climate.

Psychological thrillers themselves are easily drawn in by readers because of their ability to heighten sensations both physically and emotionally. Men and women operate differently and

their reactions to experiencing this genre are notable, as well as how male and female authors depict the experiences of suspense in thrillers due to these differences. According to research conducted by Anne Moir and David Jessel in the book, *Brainsex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women*, depicted by Tom Butler-Bowdon's *50 psychology classics*, "The sexes are different because their brains are different. The brain, the chief administrative and emotional organ of life, is differently constructed in men and in women; it processes information in a different way, which results in different perceptions, priorities, and behavior" (Butler-Bowdon). This insight further supports the notion that female writers bring a unique insight to the genre, as their experiences differ biologically and psychologically from that of men.

Research conducted on male and female genetics in this reference additionally finds that even at a few hours, babies exhibit definite tendencies. For instance, a "girl baby gazes at people's faces, while boys seem more interested in objects. Girl babies respond better to soothing sounds are more frightened by noise and seem to have a keener sense of hearing (Butler-Bowdon). These sensory differences may contribute to the types of details a female author might incorporate to create suspense in their novel compared to that of their male counterpart. Using the senses, for instance, is essential for suspense in the genre, where sound can act as an increasingly useful technique in the literature when conducting a suspenseful thriller, where women are biologically more in tune than men with sounds. Whereas research notes, that in the toddler stage, then, "the way boys and girls see and experience the world is through the lens of their gender's brain chemistry. Boys are more adventurous in their play and roam more widely. They work to improve their spatial skills, while girls tend to work harder on their interpersonal skills. As children grow into puberty and early adolescence, it can be determined that boys' brains are more specialized and compartmentalized, with their spatial and language skills located

in specific centers, while girl's brain functions are generally more diffused, with these skills controlled by centers in both sides" (Butler-Bowdon). These differences are imperative to how a novel is written, where important inter-relationships are essential to the success of any successful thriller as attention to detail is imperative. This is not to denounce the ability of male authors to curate strong character connections or emotional conflicts in their given narratives; however, the research indicates that it is simply more natural biologically for women to observe and then curate this in their work than it is for men, which may be contributing to the popularity of female authorship in the genre.

Further studies in Butler Bowdon's *50 psychology classics* note that the more focused organization of the male brain may account for "males' stereotypical single-mindedness mindsets and men's famous ability to read maps can be attributed to stronger spatial capacity." Women, on the other hand, have a "greater overall awareness of a situation and are much more successful at picking up small facial cues that men don't see; this helps them to be better judges of character and may account for "women's intuition" and women also have more effective peripheral vision and generally better sense all round" (Butler-Bowdon). This again further perpetuates the notion that the success of the psychological thriller genre is not singlehandedly due to the content of a novel but may also be due to the gender of the author as well, as women have stronger interpersonal skills biologically and genetically, which may contribute to the way the novels written are portrayed compared to male authors. To reiterate, however, just because the literature supports the belief that female-driven authorship may contribute to the success of the genre of thrillers and that the genre's use of suspense and plot alone are not the only reason for the popularity, it can not be ruled out that there is not enough research yet to definitively suggest this observation as fact, but merely support its suspicions.

Psychological thrillers get their name for their especially strong connection to the psychology of their characters and their motivations which drives a suspenseful plot, which are often strengths found in female authors' works. Psychology as a study, therefore, allows for the opportunity for further connections toward the argument that women writers are essential catalysts for the continued success of the psychological thriller genre. Freud for instance, was an avid reader of mystery and detective stories, especially from the work of Agatha Christie, in which he often could predict her endings, due to his knowledge of psychology (Cohen). Freud is known for his psychoanalysis theory which states that “human behavior is influenced by conscious as well as unconscious memories, thoughts, dreams, and urges, and proposes the existence of the psyche in individuals and the id, ego, and superego’s functionalities”, which was essential to many thriller’s plots and character motivations in the canon (Cohen). There is quite a bit of overlap where psychologists and thriller novels aim to solve the same things, seeking a similar hidden truth for answers where the conscious and the subconscious coincide. Both authors and psychoanalysis had the understanding and often the same belief in common psychological theories. Therefore, the focus on psychological behavior can be found in all eras of the canon of this literature and most notable in thriller fiction.

For instance, Freud noted that the process in psychology for hunting the thimble to seek answers in therapy for oneself is like that of Christie’s catching the killer process in her works (Cohen). Behaviors that highlight the psychological choices found in Christie’s works include behavior such as false confessions, found in *The ABC Murders*. According to *Inspecting Psychology*, “False confessions are central to the plot of *The ABC Murders*” In *The ABC Murders*, Alexander Cust admitted to killing Anne Archer in Andover, Betty in Bexhill, Sir Carmichael Clarke in Churston and a final victim in Doncaster. He is labeled as a senseless

maniac' and despite not remembering the killings he believes he must have done it so he falsely confesses. However, Cust is essentially framed but unaware of his own framing by the true murderer, as he had been a victim of shell shock or PTSD of the time in the 1914 war and was subject to episodes. In the end, Detective Poirot finds the guilty and absolves Cust" (Cohen).

This novel is a prime example of how utilizing psychology can play a crucial role in the development of a strong thriller plot, which female writers are often keener to depict, due to their biological tendency toward detail, interpersonal relationships, and emotional as well as situational awareness provided to them biologically and in early psychological development.

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