Routledge Advances in Popular Culture studies

REASSESSING *MURDER, SHE WROTE*

THE AFTERLIVES OF A POPULAR CULTURE PHENOMENON

Edited by Eva Burke and Jennifer Schnabel

Reassessing *Murder, She Wrote*

This book provides a critical overview of the cultural impact of the *Murder, She Wrote* TV series and its paratextual elements, including board and video games, podcasts, fan conventions, collectible figures, and ghostwritten novels. It also explores the series' position within the crime genre, particularly its engagement with earlier iterations of the 'lady detective'.

Bringing together a broad range of experts, the book includes contributions from both academics and crime fiction novelists to offer a wide-ranging view of this popular series and its afterlives.

Suitable for scholars and students working on popular culture, crime fiction, TV studies or fan studies, this collection provides an interdisciplinary analysis of one of the most successful and enduring female-fronted detective series in history.

Eva Burke completed her PhD, funded by the Irish Research Council, at the school of English at Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Dr. Clare Clarke. Her research looks at domestic noir fiction, specifically the work of Gillian Flynn. Eva has published work in the *Journal of International Women's Studies, Feminist Spaces* and *Trinity Postgraduate Review* and the 2018 edited collection *From the Domestic to the Dominant: The New Face of Crime Fiction*, published by Palgrave Macmillan. She also co-edited a special 'domestic noir' issue of *Clues: A Journal of Detection*.

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Dedication

For Dame Angela Brigid Lansbury

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Introduction

'Jessica is Timeless': Cultural Significance of *Murder, She Wrote*

Eva Burke and Jennifer Schnabel

When Routledge announced a call for monograph proposals for their Advances in Popular Culture Studies series, a long-gestating dream was born: we thought the world desperately needed a collection of essays on the television show *Murder, She Wrote*. To us, and to fans around the world, amateur detective Jessica Fletcher is an icon, a canonical detective in the evolution of crime fiction as a genre, and a groundbreaking character that drove a long-running American television series and solidified its legacy. Since its original run on American TV, the show has been syndicated across the world, and continues to air internationally. The complete series is available on DVD, and the show is currently available to stream on several platforms, at least one for free, with episodes continuously on television networks in multiple countries.

Turn on your television at any given time and you are likely to stumble into Cabot Cove. Running for twelve seasons between 1984 and 1996, the award-winning series has continued to maintain a cultural presence in the years since it initially aired. The show's focus on the crime-solving adventures of widowed mystery writer Jessica Fletcher, in the tradition of the 'amateur lady detective', appealed (and continues to appeal) to a wide audience. At the peak of its popularity, *Murder, She Wrote* regularly drew millions of viewers – a considerable feat for a series centering on the exploits of a decidedly single middle-aged female character.

Fans and critics have offered some theories in regard to the series' enduring popularity – in many ways, it typifies what is known as 'cozy crime'; cozy crime narratives are narratives, which build on the tropes of Golden Age detective fiction to provide readers and viewers with stories largely devoid of sex and extreme violence (Betz, 2021). The aim is less to unsettle or disturb than to reassure that, once the process of detection has run its course and the crime is 'solved', order can and will be restored to the world. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a reported rise in what is known as 'comfort viewing' (Gauntlett & Hill, 2001) took place – in lockdown, viewers were attracted to the familiar and the predictable. Author Shawn Hitchins, for example, notes that watching *Murder, She Wrote* during quarantine inspired him to reflect on the radical kindness practiced by Jessica Fletcher, a 'pop-folklore character who understood herself, her privilege, and the social context that created

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her into being so wholly that she could confront the challenges of her time' (Hitchins, 2020). Hitchins credits the series with foregrounding injustices, which remain familiar and relevant to contemporary viewers, including gender discrimination and sexual power imbalances. Perhaps it is the timelessness of these abuses of power and the small but unwavering opposition offered by Jessica that has allowed the series and the character to garner such a durable fanbase; after all, no injustice goes unanswered on Jessica's watch.

We believed that a collection of essays on *Murder, She Wrote* could achieve a few goals: first, it could explore the cultural resonance of the series and the thriving fan culture, which still surrounds it. It might also allow us to consider what the ongoing popularity of the show, and the fan-narratives built around it, might tell us about consumers of detective fiction. This project would also give our contributors space to investigate how the series informed and continues to inform popular perceptions of the female detective, older women in media, the 'small town mystery' (Geherin, 2008), and the idea of 'comfort viewing'. The result has been a collection of essays, which offer insightful and original commentary on a cultural phenomenon; topics range from representations of female sexuality within the series to discussions of the series' 'coziness' as mediated through race and social status, as well as its role in contemporary queer culture.

Because this topic has both academic and popular appeal, we set out to conduct interviews with several content creators who run *Murder, She Wrote* social media accounts, host interactive *Murder, She Wrote* 'solve-along' shows, and write *Murder, She Wrote* novels about their projects. In addition, we spoke to several fans about why they believe *Murder, She Wrote* and why the character of Jessica Fletcher continues to have cultural significance and appeals to diverse audiences across decades and mediums. These interviews allowed us to unpack the cultural resonance of the series and the fan culture which has continued to thrive almost three decades after the last episode aired.

The questions we prepared for our interviewees focused on earliest memories of and experiences with the show, favorite episodes or seasons, current engagement, and thoughts on its ongoing popularity and cultural legacy. Those who have created content relating to the show (related fiction, journalism, or interactive fan experiences) were asked about their output and fan responses. We also asked for their thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the show, its viewership, and their perceptions of Jessica Fletcher. These questions helped us gain insight into the ways in which *Murder, She Wrote* has become a cultural mainstay and continues to inform popular perceptions of the female detective, older women in media, the 'small town mystery', and the idea of 'comfort viewing'.

Our survey instrument included the following questions:

1 Tell us about your initial engagement with and/or memories of the television show *Murder, She Wrote*.
2 Which are your favorite seasons or episodes and why?

3 Tell us about your current engagement with the show as a viewer, content creator, event organizer, or other role.
4 If applicable, please tell us why you chose to create content to engage with *Murder, She Wrote* and its fans? To the extent you are comfortable, please describe the audience feedback you have received.
5 Why do you think people still watch *Murder, She Wrote?*
6 Why do you think the formulaic nature of the show appeals to a general audience?
7 How, if at all, do you think the Covid-19 pandemic affected audience interest in *Murder, She Wrote*?
8 How, if at all, do you think the Covid-19 pandemic affected audience interest in your content?
9 How do you think the character of mystery writer and amateur investigator Jessica Fletcher reflected or challenged the public's idea of popular detectives in literature or on the screen when *Murder, She Wrote* debuted in 1984? What about now?
10 How do you view the overall cultural impact or legacy of *Murder, She Wrote*?
11 How do you view the overall cultural impact or legacy of the character of Jessica Fletcher?
12 Do you have additional thoughts or observations about the popularity of the television show *Murder, She Wrote* that you would like to share?

A number of our participants explained that they were inspired by *Murder, She Wrote* to create material related to or inspired by the show. We were interested in the motivations behind this as well as the responses from the show's fanbase. One of our participants, Tim, is the creator and host of a live 'solve-along' show, which has toured the UK, Ireland, Australia and has been performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Tim watched the series as it was originally airing in Australia in the 1980s and, as an Agatha Christie fan, he was drawn to the murder mystery format. The idea for a live, interactive show first came to him with the title 'solve-a-long Murder She Wrote'. He originally conceived of it, in 2018, as a kind of competitive experience, where fans would play against one another in teams to solve the mystery of an episode. Because of certain practicalities, not least internet recaps of each episode, this was unfeasible. Instead, the show has become a sort of communal viewing experience. Audiences watch an episode and, as it progresses, they engage with polls and quizzes to 'solve' it together. The gamification of the series is something we were particularly interested in and something explored in this collection: Marco Arnaudo offers a ludonarrative analysis of the official *Murder, She Wrote* board game, exploring the ways in which such intermedia artefacts can give us unique insights into this fictional world.

Tim, our solve-a-long host, emphasized that in bringing together fans of the series, he wanted to avoid cynicism or mean-spiritedness. The character

of Jessica is not the butt of jokes – there's real affection for the series in his shows. In terms of audience demographics, participants tend to be women between the ages of 25 and 55, but there are pockets of gay men (the series has a significant queer fanbase; in an interview with *The Advocate*, Lansbury professed herself 'proud to be a gay icon' – Nina Trevedi's contribution to this collection uses auto-ethnography to examine this queer fandom, as well as the racial dynamics therein), and university students. People also attend dressed in Jessica cosplay; Tim calls them 'Fangelas'. His success and the genuine enthusiasm fans have brought to these live shows indicate a persistent and sincere enjoyment of *Murder, She Wrote* in 2024. This sincerity is something shared by all our interviewees and contributors, whose interest in and affection for the series has given us some sense of the influence and impact it has had across generations. One of our interviewees, journalist Patrick Freyne, pointed to the proliferation of cynical and 'troubled' fictional detectives as a possible factor in the enduring popularity of Cabot Cove and Jessica Fletcher – and as various acts of extreme and explicit violence are foregrounded in much of the media we consume (and increasingly the social media we engage with), a desire for a return to the gentler landscapes of twentieth-century network television seems logical. While it may seem regressive or insular to watch and re-watch the weekly adventures of Jessica in lieu of anything more contemporary or hard-bitten (and 'comfort viewing', as discussed here, is certainly a large part of its appeal), the breadth and depth of scholarship in this collection is a testament to the cultural value of *Murder, She Wrote*.

Another of our interviewees, Terrie Moran, is the official ghostwriter for the *Murder, She Wrote* book series, 'co-authored' with Jessica Fletcher. She is a lifelong fan of the series and remembers watching it religiously as a young mother in the 1980s. She began writing cozy mysteries in the early 2000s and in 2020 was approached to take over the official book series. Terrie's first book, *Killing in a Koi Pond*, was book 53 of the series, so she needed to be mindful of established continuity (interestingly, with her most recent book, *Death on the Emerald Isle*, published in 2023, Terrie has become the first writer to take Jessica to Northern Ireland rather than the Republic of Ireland). Terrie explained to us that there is a base of 'mega fans' who take the series very seriously and who will get in touch with the ghostwriter if they find mistakes or inconsistencies. Terrie constantly receives emails from these fans and is aware of their investment in the extended series. She began her ghostwriting career with the assumption that a large part of her readership would be female but has discovered a 'very vocal' male fanbase. In terms of age, she's noticed that there is an active younger fan base of people who weren't born while the show was originally airing – people who have discovered the series via streaming or cultural osmosis. The memetic appeal of the series is certainly of note here too, and this is something explored in Lucia Casiraghi and Nicolò Salmaso's chapter on the series' popularity in Italy and the ways in which social media has become a kind of paratextual space for this popularity to flourish.

We wondered how much of viewers' 'rediscovery' of the show was connected to 'comfort viewing' during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the familiarity of the 'cozy' mystery provided 'a welcome contrast to the way we've all been suspended between life as it was before COVID and life as it will be after' (Lush, 2021). Phyllis Betz's chapter touches on the evolution of this form and the extent to which *Murder, She Wrote* signifies a transition from the Golden Age mystery novel to the 'cozy crime' of today. Links between the Golden Age detective and Jessica are further explored in Mark Aldridge's chapter, in which the undeniable influence of Agatha Christie's work, and the difficulty of stepping outside of its shadow, is discussed.

Most of our participants were original viewers of the show and watched it on terrestrial TV rather than streaming or on DVD. Patrick Freyne watched it as a child and remembers it was on 'every day' in Ireland (where it still airs with some regularity – and Jessica's Irish jaunts are the focus of Chapter 10, in which Eva Burke explores various constructions of 'Irishness'). Patrick reflected on the relative comfort of formula, something he thinks has been somewhat lost in the era of 'prestige TV'. Of course, scholars of Golden Age detective fiction will be familiar with this framing of the formulaic mystery as what Alison Light (1991) calls 'a literature of convalescence', and we might say that this designation is far more appropriate for *Murder, She Wrote* than the likes of Agatha Christie, whose work is, in many ways, far from reassuring. This 'coziness' is discussed in Allysha Winburn, Mark Winburn, and Cate Bird's chapter on the series and the incongruity of a town with a death rate as high as Cabot Cove's being perceived as a comforting and safe space.

It is worth noting that the majority of our interviewees expressed a preference for episodes where Jessica remains in Cabot Cove and solves local mysteries, in contrast to episodes where she travels abroad and interacts with the larger world. Cyndi, a social sciences librarian who started watching in the late 1980s as a mom of twins, told us that she is not a fan of the 'international episodes' because they're not as 'cozy'. Tim, our 'solve-a-long' host, has observed that audiences tend to be upset by episodes that break the formula or subvert expectations, and again, this suggests that a large part of the enjoyment *Murder, She Wrote* fans get from the series is connected to the comfort of formula and predictability. Jill Anderson's chapter touches on Jessica's frequent travels and the extent to which stereotypes with regard to the Southern United States are reinforced via her visits to New Orleans. And while predictability is certainly a selling point, in some ways, Jessica is arguably a progressive figure. Both Sharon Dempsey and Mary Freier, in their respective chapters, delve into the construction of Jessica as a 'feminist' protagonist, offering distinct but compelling interpretations of the character and her fictional world in relation to the gender politics of the late twentieth century.

All of our interviewees shared thoughts on Jessica Fletcher's role as a detective and as an older female protagonist in a television series. Cyndi appreciated how Jessica was an average person, a former schoolteacher who began to write mystery novels late in life. Jessica commands respect as an older woman

and because of her position in the Cabot Cove community. Cyndi doesn't believe Jessica's character has been replicated and that, unfortunately, perhaps the public hasn't been ready for another woman in such a role. Ghostwriter Terrie was drawn to Jessica's character because 'you could see she was just like you' and that 'she is honest, trustworthy, logical'. She was 'around when a bad thing happened', or she felt that an issue needed to be resolved for a few people or a larger community or social group.

Tim noted that he likes that Jessica rejects the idea of 'female intuition' and reinforces the idea that one can solve a mystery using common sense and that anyone can work it out if they try, even if they begin later in life. The significance of her status as an older female protagonist is critically scrutinized in this collection, most notably by Michelle Kazmer, who explores Jessica's occasionally Marple-esque methods of gathering and processing information, and Jennifer Schnabel, who discusses the depiction of female authorship in the series. Female authorship is further examined in Kristi Humphreys' chapter on the women writers whose contributions to the series are among the most popular with fans.

Ongoing Legacy

We began this project with a desire to explore or unpack the legacy of a show that has maintained a cultural resonance that many popular crime shows from the 1980s have not. Our interviews indicated a number of reasons for this cultural resonance, including the continuing appeal of Jessica Fletcher as a heroine who is intelligent and resourceful. A number of our interviewees spoke about the significance of Jessica as a child free protagonist; we see her take on the role of mentor to younger people several times throughout the series, but she is notably free of motherly or grandmotherly duties. Ash, a fiction writer, appreciates that Jessica is like everyone's favorite teacher or auntie, and 'everybody is able to own that relationship with her a little bit'. One of our interviewees, Cyndi, says 'I'm so glad they didn't make her a grandmother' – Jessica, as an older woman whose child free status is not framed in terms of a 'lack' or regret, is, in many ways, still quite an unusual character.

Terrie, ghostwriter of the series, spoke about the necessity of getting small details right, because the readership is very 'in tune' with Cabot Cove and the world of *Murder, She Wrote*. And in many ways, the series' legacy is a literary one; it lives on in these books and in the 'cozy crime' subgenre more generally. Many of our contributors were fascinated by how and why we find contemporary cultural value in a series which offers us a detective who is determinedly *untroubled*, whose 'trauma' seems nonexistent, who inhabits a world that is cozy and comforting, despite the fact that murder is a regular occurrence.

As an 'average person', Jessica has been through rough patches in her life. She is a widow and certainly misses her late husband, Frank. However, there does not seem to be much turmoil in her life. Often, as Tim says, we get harder-edged women or outsiders as detectives; Jessica is different. From what

we see on the show, she does not have a mental health issue or an alcohol problem, she is not haunted by past transgressions, she is not a loner with poor social skills. Patrick points out that modern television shows imply that a trauma-motivated character is somehow more authentic, but he wishes that were different. *In Murder, She Wrote*, Jessica is 'allowed to just be happy. She doesn't feel guilty about it'. And as Terrie says, 'You could live in her world almost entirely. There's no change. Jessica is timeless. *Murder, She Wrote* is timeless'.

Incorporating targeted interviews into our research methodology for this introduction helped enrich our understanding of why *Murder, She Wrote*, and the amateur detective Jessica Fletcher continues to resonate with audiences across the globe. Our extended conversations with fans and creators have supported our hypothesis that fans continue to engage with the show for a multitude of reasons but they all bring various levels of appreciation and enjoyment based on their individual memories of watching *Murder, She Wrote* alone or with loved ones, their admiration of the steady presence of the practical, insightful, and put-together Jessica Fletcher, and reliance on many seasons of formulaic, discrete episodes to provide comfort in periods of personal and collective uncertainty. Each of our contributors, in addition to having a scholarly interest in the series, is a fan, and their willingness to critically engage with something so personally meaningful has resulted in a collection that is thoughtful, incisive, and witty – not unlike Jessica herself.

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Part I

J.B. Fletcher, Writing, and Genre

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1 The Fairest of Them All

Jessica Fletcher's Reign of the Queen of Mystery in *Murder, She Wrote*

Jennifer Schnabel

Jessica Fletcher, the protagonist in the American television series *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996), is a retired English teacher from Cabot Cove, Maine, who turned to mystery writing after her husband died. She continues to publish mysteries under the pen name J.B. Fletcher and also investigates crimes in Cabot Cove and in other cities when she travels for book tours or visits friends and family. The iconic character, played by Angela Lansbury, is particularly noteworthy in the study of television history because she is an older female protagonist and a skilled investigator, a change from the more traditional male detective archetype viewers were accustomed to seeing on their screens.

Jessica Fletcher as a middle-aged woman detective is a cultural shift that other chapters in this collection explore at length. As Linda Mizejewski notes in the introduction of her book about professional female detectives on screen, *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, if "asked to imagine a private investigator (P.I), most people will still picture Peter Falk as Columbo or Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade in a rumpled trench coat and two-days' growth of beard" (2004, p. 2). As for amateur detectives, most would envision an eccentric Sherlock Holmes in a deerstalker hat, a peppy teenager like Nancy Drew, or a white-haired auntie like Miss Marple. While the character of Jessica Fletcher has made a significant contribution to shifting our ideas of how a fictional detective looks and functions in their community, her identity and second career as a popular mystery writer is equally important to understanding gender stereotypes and perceptions, especially of women authors.

Second-wave feminist literary theory provides a clarifying lens through which to examine Jessica as a mystery writer. Specifically, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's pivotal 1979 collection, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, sheds light on Jessica's transformation from a widow and retired teacher to a best-selling author. Two episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*, both of which aired in two parts—the pilot "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes" (1984) and "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall" (1989)—offer insights on her transformation from small-town widow and teacher to best-selling author and acknowledged "queen of mystery" in the *Murder, She Wrote* universe and the overall development of Jessica as a mystery writer throughout the series.

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Mystery Writing Detectives on Television

Though she might be the most well-known, Jessica Fletcher is not the first mystery writer character on television to investigate crimes as a professional or amateur sleuth. The German series *The Count Has the Honor* (translated title) (1967–1977) follows a mystery writing aristocrat as he and his butler investigate crimes. The TV movie series *The Snoop Sisters* (1973–1974) features a spinster mystery writer and her widowed sister who does the typing and even includes a guest appearance by heavy metal rocker Alice Cooper. *Department* (1971–1972) focused on a group of Interpol operatives that included a male mystery writer, Jason King, who starred in a short-lived spin-off series as the titular character. *Murder, She Wrote* was preceded by multiple television adaptations of Ellery Queen, the character first created by Frederic Dannay and Manfred Bennington Leigh in 1928 and appeared in many novels and short stories.[1]

Since *Murder, She Wrote*, other mystery writer/investigator characters have appeared on television. *Over My Dead Body* (1990–1991) features a crime-solving duo, one of whom is a mystery writer. The pilot *Rewrite for Murder* (1991) features an ex-convict turned mystery writer and creator of a mystery TV series solving crimes. Temperance Brennen debuted in *Bones* in 2005, a series based on Kathy Reichs' books, and Richard Castle was featured in *Castle* from 2009 to 2015. The recent British show *Queens of Mystery* features the protagonist's three crime-solving aunts who are all mystery writers. Mystery writers also appear in television series as side characters or crime victims. For example, in 1984's *Partners in Crime*, the main character's mother is an unpublished mystery writer and owns a mystery bookstore. As each of these characters demonstrates, mystery writers make sense as detective figures since storylines draw upon multiple facets of their professional experiences and expertise to drive plots, involving them in an environment in which they feel comfortable.

Despite the popular and commercial success of these portrayals of mystery writers on screen, the genre itself has not been respected within literary circles. As Kathleen Klein writes in her introduction to *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers* (1995), "the implication of mystery fiction's second-class status is easily supported by our culture," citing how frequently contemporary mystery writers are asked when they "are going to write a real novel" (p. 3). She goes on, "And so, why has a genre which finds itself undervalued in the hierarchization process establish hierarchies of its own? I would date the beginning of the gender/genre wars at the midpoint in the Golden Age of detective fiction" (p. 4). Klein is referring to the very masculine hard-boiled detective characters and stories, created by mostly men in response to the more traditional British country house murder mysteries crafted by predominantly women writers, and points out this period was after the women's movement of the twentieth century and women's suffrage in the US and England.[2] Klein continues, "The new debates over women private eyes, the 'cozy' mystery, and access to the overwhelmingly female readership began in the midst of the

second women's movement. And the feminist theories of this period—1968 to the present—provide the tools with which to examine this explicitly gendered connection." As a woman investigator appearing in a show that reflects a cozy mystery tradition, Jessica Fletcher fits well within these conversations.

As other contributors like Mary P. Freier argue elsewhere in this collection, feminist criticism provides a helpful lens through which to analyze the reception of crime fiction in print and television that is especially useful when discussing Jessica Fletcher's profession as a mystery writer. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar consider and examine nineteenth-century women writers in their now canonical *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2020); yet there is much that is applicable to Jessica, her gender ambiguous nom de plume J.B. Fletcher, and the show's overall depictions of women writers. In the essay "The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity," Gilbert and Gubar discuss the metaphor of literary paternity as an illustration of the patriarchal structure of Western society, and they assert that male writers point out possession and control over their female characters, who, in turn, do not have the same agency. While men have the opportunity to talk back to other men to "refute one fiction with another," they write, "women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to *mere* properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely … by male expectations and designs" (p. 12). Women writers, especially before the nineteenth century, they argue, had to "alternately define themselves as angel-woman or monster-women," an extension of Virginia Woolf's declaration that women writers must "kill the angel in the house" to be successful. The first episode of *Murder, She Wrote* depicts Jessica Fletcher's initial killing of her angel and writing through her monster to become the best-selling author J.B. Fletcher.

"The Murder of Sherlock Holmes" (1984)

We are first introduced to Jessica Fletcher on September 30, 1984, in "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes." She receives a call from her nephew, Grady, whom she helped raise, informing her that he secretly sent the manuscript of a novel she had written to his friend who gave it to a big publisher who loved it. Jessica is flabbergasted:

Jessica: What! Oh, dear, no.
Grady: I thought you'd be pleased.
Jessica: Well, I am not pleased, Grady. I'm not a writer. Look, I … I was just filling time after your uncle died. I didn't dream for a minute ….
Grady: That's the trouble, Aunt Jess. You've never dreamed, and it's about time you did.

Though Grady is not a writer or publisher himself, the episode suggests his decision to intervene was necessary for her writing to appear in print. While his

intentions are depicted as supportive and encouraging, his validation solidifies the quality of Jessica's work to the viewers. She did not, however, intend for him (or anyone) to see it.

Jessica Fletcher is instantly transported from Cabot Cove to New York City for a press tour. When she arrives on the train, she thanks the porter for his help and says, "I certainly hope that your boy gets that scholarship." We are again reminded that she is a retired schoolteacher out of her element in the big city and the world of book publicity tours. Jessica is modest and demure and continually expresses her surprise that her novel is a bestseller and receiving lots of publicity. Jessica as the modest creator replies to one interviewer: "Well, actually, I never suspected that my book would be published. I really wrote it, well, for my own enjoyment, I guess … You know, like some people needlepoint or paint." It is notable that she chooses traditionally female-dominated hobbies, often minimized as frivolous, as a comparison to her writing. This echoes her backstory, where she worked in a female-dominated profession. In addition, she has chosen a gender-neutral pseudonym, J.B. Fletcher, to attach to her work, reminding viewers simultaneously that she was not searching for the spotlight and also that women writers from the last two centuries have employed the same strategy to hide their female identities and protect themselves from discrimination from patriarchal publishing practices that infected editors as well as readers. In these scenes, it is clear Jessica the mystery writer has not rid herself of her angel, minimizing her accomplishment and disconnecting herself from her art. However, Jessica the retired school teacher from a small, seaside town *could* have written a chaste romance novel or an instructional children's book while entertaining herself in widowhood and retirement, like others choose to paint a serene landscape or embroider flowers on a pillow sham. Instead, she writes *The Corpse Danced at Midnight* in which the murderer turns out to be a pregnant ballerina.

Her novel is celebrated in New York, but Jessica is not enjoying herself: "these last few days, I've been insulted, browbeaten and patronized. And I say no, thank you." Sensing her frustration, her publisher, Preston Giles, invites her to a fancy costume party at his country house, where guests are asked to dress as their favorite fictional characters. (He also makes romantic overtures toward her.) Jessica chooses to dress in pink as Cinderella's Fairy Godmother and appears angelic as she descends the stairs. A man dressed as Sherlock Holmes is shot in the head; the body is found in the swimming pool the next morning. Jessica, of course, starts her own investigation and does identify the killer: her publisher, which is a fitting way for her to avoid becoming his property, both as a financial investment and as a possible paramour.

Contemporary feminist criticism helps us unpack this tension between male approval of women's authorship and her own creative agency. Reading this episode through Gilbert and Gubar's metaphor of literary paternity, the only way Jessica had the opportunity to explore authorship is for her husband, Frank, to pass away. Her widowhood enabled her to finally kill the angel in the house and write *The Corpse Danced at Midnight*. Yet it is her nephew Grady, another

man in her life, who deprived her of agency when he shared her manuscript with a publisher without her knowing. Once she is recognized publicly as a writer and "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes" reaches its conclusion, Jessica gradually reclaims the agency over her writing she lost in the beginning. She solves the case that leads to the arrest of Jessica's male publisher (and potential love interest), freeing herself to continue writing without having to see herself and her work through his gaze, a liberating development as she transitions from retired educator to mystery writer and respected amateur detective. Furthermore, the dead man in the pool dressed as Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic investigator and arguably the most recognizable depiction of a detective figure symbolizes Jessica's freedom to take her own place in the genre. Viewers are simultaneously introduced to Jessica Fletcher the amateur detective, and they also meet the new queen of mystery: J.B. Fletcher.[3]

Jessica remains single throughout the rest of the series; Fischer points out it would be difficult to have her traipsing all over the world on book tours and solving mysteries with a husband in tow. If, according to Gilbert and Gubar, women writers are starting to see themselves clearly in the mirror without the interference of the image men create of them for their own purposes, then a 58-year-old widow should be permitted to write about blood, death, corpses, crime scenes, and killers without anyone looking over her shoulder, as long as she keeps her "monster" in check to preserve her creativity. In Jessica's books, as in each *Murder, She Wrote* episode where she solves a case, there may be lots of murders, but the truth and justice always prevail.

As Jessica leaves New York to return to Cabot Cove at the end of "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes," the detective who worked on the murder cases bids her farewell: "It was a great pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Fletcher. You have a rare gift for murder. Continued success." Jessica, seemingly unsure how to take the compliment, replies, "Why, thank you, I think." This exchange indicates Jessica has received validation from a male detective for her investigative skills and her mystery writing; however, her polite, lukewarm response suggests she doesn't much need it. She has proven to herself that she can triumph in both spaces.

"Mirror, Mirror on the Wall" (1989)

By the fifth season of *Murder, She Wrote*, Jessica has established herself as a successful mystery writer, but in "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall," she is confronted by another woman who holds the title of queen. "Mirror, Mirror," the last episode of the season, continues to question the necessity of male validation for women writers like Jessica Fletcher and her fictitious peers. In "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes," Jessica needed her husband, her nephew, and her publisher to enable her writing career and then a representation of Sherlock Holmes and his iconic creator to die for her to begin her reign as "queen of mystery." The episode follows the Snow White narrative traditionally associated with the 1937 Disney film and positions Jessica Fletcher as an innocent Snow White

and another famous mystery writer, Eudora McVeigh, as the Evil Queen who is threatened by Jessica's success as a writer. In this episode, another male publisher, Lew Bracken, attempts to assert his authority over women mystery writers. While he is not ultimately revealed to be a criminal like Preston Giles, his role affects the professional trajectory of another famous mystery writer, Eudora McVeigh.

Gilbert and Gubar use the nineteenth-century Brothers Grimm version of the Snow White fairy tale as a text to illustrate their points about literary paternity. Along with a clear depiction of the extreme angel/monster roles assigned to female characters, the story features several murder plots, Snow White coughing up the poisoned apple when she is lifted out of her glass coffin, and the Queen's horrific demise as she is forced to dance in burning hot shoes at Snow White's wedding. Gilbert and Gubar assert that the male voice of the looking glass or mirror is surely the absentee King's to symbolize "the patriarchal judgment that rules the Queen's—and every woman's—self-evaluation" (2020, p. 38).

In the opening scene, we meet Eudora McVeigh's second husband, Hank, and his adult son Bobby at a pool hall. One of Hank's friends tells him he's reading a book of Eudora. Hank comments that it's "an oldie but a goody." Bobby adds, "Yeah, not like her new ones, but—." This exchange is the first indication we get that Eudora is perceived as having trouble with her writing. In the next scene, this is confirmed: Lew Bracken, Eudora's publisher, tells her and her assistant Liza he is breaking ties with her temporarily since she hasn't written a bestseller recently and "rewrites are not going to help" her latest manuscript. They are having a meeting in his New York City office, and he suggests she take a year off.

The audience understands the impact of Eudora's name recognition when Lew says, "In the mystery field you've been on top for nearly two decades. You're right up there—and, uh, rightly so—with Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, P.D. James. But … there comes a time when the- Well, when the palette runs dry, the colors fade away." These real-life mystery writers, all British, two (Christie and Sayers) from the golden age era of detective fiction and one (James) who began her writing career in 1962, 22 years before J.B. Fletcher's debut, situate Eudora among the best-selling women writers of the genre. She fiercely pushes back on him:

Eudora: Mr. Bracken, may I remind you … that for the past 22 years … I have been America's undisputed premiere female mystery writer.

Lew: Nobody questions that, Eudora, but times change, people change, tastes change. And we all have to change with them. … your works have become repetitive and tired. You're writing as if we're still in the '60s.

Eudora: According to whom? The critics? That simpering cadre of barnacles, ticks and other parasites.

In response to his suggestion that she spend time with Hank at their home in Nantucket, she declares, "I have no intention of vegetating on some sand dune. Lewis, you need my new book for your Christmas catalog." He replies with "I'll survive."

Eudora knows that he's interested in signing J.B. Fletcher because "that rumor's been on the street for about a week," implying she is a part of a community of mystery writers or at least well-connected in the publishing world Lew tells her it's strictly business:

Lew: Mrs. Fletcher's last six books are best sellers. She's about to be named Mystery Writer of the Year …

Eudora: Dear old friend, you are a paragon of fidelity. I wish you and Mrs. Fletcher both exactly what you deserve: Each other.

She walks out of the office, and Liza says to Lew, "I can't believe it. The money that woman has made for you." She is also insulted that Lew would brush aside his relationship with Eudora. He responds, "Can't be helped. I've never gotten anywhere being subtle, Liza. Since she married Hank Shipton, her work has been mediocre."

The publisher is indeed eager to sign Jessica, who, we learn, is hesitant to switch representation. Lew's purely fiscally based decision to dismiss Eudora without regard to the past successes of his client and the professional relationship should set him up as the bad guy in the episode: he is a man who is treating these women writers as disposable and only good for his own financial gain. Instead, we are meant to view Eudora's female rage after her dismissal as her villain origin story.

After the meeting with Lew Bracken, Eudora is talking to her assistant Liza:

> I'm being outflanked, outwritten by an English teacher from Maine. Somehow, when I wasn't looking, they managed to coronate a new queen of mystery.

Liza: You-You are blowing this all out of proportion.

Eudora: Oh, am I? Let's face it, darling. I'm passé. Eudora McVeigh- Is she still alive? My career is in tatters. My marriage is hanging by a thread. And who do I have to thank for this? Dear, lovable, sweet-as-apple-pie Jessica Fletcher, who's just bounced me from fifth row center back to the last row in the balcony.

Liza: You can't blame her personally.

Eudora: You'd be surprised at what I can do, Liza. And what I will do to get back on top.

These opening scenes of "Mirror, Mirror" are ripe for analysis using the angel/monster imagery. With the title of the episode, the audience is prepared

for a reinterpretation of the Snow White story. Hank and Lew Bracken together represent the King and, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the patriarchy; Eudora is clearly the Evil Queen, and Liza and Jessica together could be interpreted as Snow White though Jessica and Eudora are probably the same age. The publisher, a man, is treating women writers as both disposable and interchangeable, exploiting their labor and their popularity for their own purposes: profits from book sales, in this case. Instead of coveting her beauty, Eudora is jealous of a newer (if not younger) professional success. The reigning "Queen" of mystery is threatened—her fame, her livelihood, and her identity. This realization leaves Eudora no choice but to eliminate her competition to ensure her own survival.

Interestingly, Lew is specifically stating that Eudora has been successful *in the mystery field* (my emphasis), which, especially in 1989, automatically implies she's not a serious writer and her audience is not a highbrow, literary one. The first two writers he compares Eudora to—Christie and Sayers—are part of a quartet of golden age women mystery writers who were given the moniker the Queens of Crime which simultaneously lifted them up as authorities in the genre and invited audiences to compare their individual styles and merits, which still happens today. The British mystery author P.D. James, who had published nine novels by this time, is often paired with and compared to her peer and friend, Ruth Rendell, whose first novel, *From Doon with Death*, appeared in 1969. The trio of American authors of female hard-boiled detective novels—Sara Paretsky, Marcia Muller, and Sue Grafton—are often grouped together and contrasted, especially in scholarly generic discussions of the era. Many viewers, even with limited knowledge of the American and British crime and mystery fiction publishing landscape, can draw upon their memories of the Snow White story and anticipate a squaring up of McVeigh and Fletcher in this episode.

Finally, the character of Eudora, played by Jean Simmons, is obviously—and lazily—coded as a dark force or a "monster"—dark-gray hair, dark makeup, deep-voiced, dark clothing, and living in the big city. In contrast, the camera cuts to Jessica Fletcher in Cabot Cove—light-haired, natural makeup, stereotypically symbolizing angelic purity itself—she might as well have been wearing her fairy godmother costume from episode 1. This stark visual contrast implies that we can only see women, women writers, and women mystery writers as either angels or monsters. However, if we reference Gilbert and Gubar, we can also think of each author as navigating the tension between her internal angel and monster to summon creativity and assert the agency each needs to create.

Eudora then travels from New York City to surprise Jessica in Maine (apparently, they had met before), and her plans are unclear to the viewer. Will she attempt to murder Jessica?

Jean Simmons as Eudora replicates the facial expressions and deep, British-accented voice of the Evil Queen to evoke the animated Disney version of the tale, which of course would have been familiar to a contemporary audience. The score for the episode includes ominous notes for Eudora scenes and a whimsical tune when Jessica appears. Cabot Cove (the woods) is contrasted

with New York City (the castle). Eudora also brings Jessica a basket of shiny, red apples that are later found to have been injected with poison. Other characters comment on Eudora's state of mind and contribute to the characterization of her as unpredictable, unhinged, and ruthless. Hank says, "Dorie's been … kind of high-strung lately, losing her temper, acting crazy," and quotes Bobby's observation that "She's starting to mix fantasy with reality." Liza comments, "I was terrified that she'd- Do something insane … She's ready to snap." All of these observations reinforce the angel/monster dichotomy, especially in contrast to Jessica's calm, pleasant demeanor.

The Snow White tropes are carried out faithfully throughout the two-part episode: Eudora even brings a basket of shiny apples to Jessica as a hostess gift. However, she does not physically harm Jessica—instead, she steals her new manuscript and sneaks out of the house to photocopy it. To a writer, this is perhaps a more devastating attack. But Jessica is as calm as ever and confronts her:

Jessica: Last night you put a sedative in my coffee so that I would sleep very soundly.
Eudora: That's a monstrous suggestion.

By accusing Jessica of exhibiting a "monstrous" behavior, Eudora is projecting her own monstrosity onto her female rival, instead of wrestling with her own internal struggle with her creativity.

While Eudora is in Cabot Cove, a corpse is found (per usual in a *Murder, She Wrote* episode). Jessica immediately assumes her role as adviser to the sheriff. However, Eudora jumps in, as well, inserting herself into the investigation and hoping for the publicity that might come with her involvement. Jessica, always polite, introduces her as a "very well-known mystery novelist." She then seems a bit miffed: this is her territory, after all. While the opening scenes indicated we cannot have two mystery writing queens, this scene emphasizes that we can't have two mystery writing amateur detectives, either. The character of Eudora McVeigh and her ominous threats to eliminate her competition could be read as a physical representation of Jessica's "monster." As Jessica's fame grows, she will be tempted to make choices that allow the monster to flourish, thereby destroying her success.

Eudora: Jessica, I do hope you're not put out with me. About what? Why, helping your sheriff, of course. I realize this is your town, and I'm just an outsider.
Jessica: Oh, don't be ridiculous. We're not competing with each other.
Eudora: (Chuckles) No. Of course not.
Later, Eudora talks to Lew: They're fawning all over me. Think of the headlines-"Queen of mysteries solves bizarre Down East murder." And I'm beating Jessica Fletcher at her own game, in her own backyard.
We do see a bit of the headlines and publicity that surround Eudora and Jessica—together, they are, in fact, the "Queens of Mysteries."

In the end, Eudora softens toward Jessica, especially after Jessica proves her innocent of murder, leaves her unhappy marriage, and says she's going to spend time with her sister's kids: "for a few months I'll be Aunt Eudora, and see if I can put some sanity back into my life." She appears to have killed the jealousy part of her "monster" and the matrimonial part of her "angel" that was an obstacle to her creativity; however, she is not returning to writing, at least for now. With this final visit to her rival's home, she has, effectively, ceremonially relinquished her throne to Jessica. As viewers, we are supposed to be glad of Eudora's exit, which ensures Jessica's safety from the threat of a competitor on the bestseller list and a rival amateur detective. However, Eudora's storyline implies there is only room for one commercially successful woman mystery writer and "queen of mystery," which seems to have been the outcome the publisher Lew Bracken wanted. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, it is difficult for women to break free of the extreme roles of either angel or monster men have assigned to them.

Yet, by equating sanity with giving up writing, at least temporarily, Eudora recognizes that she cannot access her creativity again until she is ready to fully kill her monster inside, reflecting the ongoing struggle in women writers overall but especially women who write in genres which have traditionally be disparaged like mystery or crime fiction. It's unfortunate that Eudora's story arc does not end with a solo visit to a beach house to focus on herself, replenish her creativity, and submit her next novel to a new publisher. The episode's conclusion implies that Eudora's ambition (which I equate with the obsession with "beauty" in the Snow White/Evil Queen framework) alienated her husband and justified his cheating with her assistant Liza. Eudora's quick acceptance of their affair wraps up this thread neatly. Conversely, Lew Bracken's comment that her writing has suffered since she married Hank justifies her abandoning the marriage (killing her angel). And we're clearly meant to understand that her unchecked ambition and jealous behavior led her to attempt plagiarism of Jessica's manuscript. The only answer, the show seems to say, is for her to quit entirely. Eudora doesn't quite dance to her death in burning hot shoes like the Grimms' evil queen, but she does disappear for all intents and purposes and experiences the metaphorical death of her vocation and position. The monster—ambition and jealousy in this case—can, if allowed, resurrect and sabotage a woman's creativity at any time. We're left with Jessica Fletcher, the heroine, who can continue writing with the freedom that comes with her status as the queen of mystery as long as she does not succumb to the same monsters as Eudora. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, "the images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitely 'killed' either figure" (p. 17). With this in mind, we can only anticipate Jessica's progression as a writer to happen if she can keep both figures at bay.

The show's cocreator and writer of this episode Peter Fischer shared that he thought "Mirror, Mirror" would not only mark the conclusion to the

fifth season but would also be the finale of *Murder, She Wrote* since Angela Lansbury's contract had expired. Therefore, he chose to imply that Jessica was going to work less and maybe her close friendship with Seth, also widowed, would turn into romance. With this final scene, Jessica strikes the balance that makes everyone around her (the patriarchy) comfortable, restoring the peace in Cabot Cove (or, in Snow White terms, "the woods"), living in her home (i.e., her glass case) until she reappears in season 6. Elsewhere in the series, whenever she leaves Maine to go on a book tour or to visit friends or to briefly live in New York City, she always returns to the paternalistic town and the people who believe they own her, just as Grimm's Snow White is now queen within the confines of the castle, a possession of the new King. Considering Kristi Humphrey's analysis of *Murder, She Wrote* episodes written by women elsewhere in this volume, perhaps "Mirror, Mirror" would have ended differently if the screenplay had not been penned by a man.

While Eudora's "monster" emerges as ambition and jealousy, Jessica's monster seems to be contained in her fiction (though, in this episode, we witness her brief stab of annoyance at Eudora's presence while she consulted with the sheriff about the murder). Again, it's worth noting that Jessica does not necessarily write cozy mysteries that mirror the cases she solves in each episode of *Murder, She Wrote*. Elsewhere in the series, other characters comment on and react to her novels: In "Town Father" (1989), one tells her "your books give me nightmares," and in "Bite the Big Apple" (1991), a police detective compliments the accuracy of the crime scenes and blood splats she includes. She is not following a typical cozy mystery format as described by Phyllis Betz later in this volume. Also, as the series progresses, Jessica embraces her role as a best-selling mystery writer and is more assertive with the press, publishers, and editors. In "Dear Deadly" (1994), a newspaper editor asks Jessica to alter the content of her novel for serialization. He says, "Mrs. Fletcher, are you telling me that you're refusing to make the changes that I've requested?" Jessica replies, "Yes. Yes, I am. They wanted to serialize the book that I wrote. Now, if you don't want to do that, that is your problem." She is unconcerned about his approval and exhibits agency when defending her work and the agreement she signed.

Feminist literary criticism, such as Gilbert and Gubar's metaphor of literary paternity, and illustration of the angel/monster tension within women writers are at play throughout *Murder, She Wrote* and are especially evident in Jessica Fletcher's work as a mystery writer. Over twelve seasons, she effectively kills most of her angel, staying true to her writing—though her husband's death and her nephew's interference in the first episode expedited that. She appears to contain the monster, funneling it into her novels and returning periodically to Cabot Cove while embracing her identity as a popular, productive mystery writer. After episode 1, she grows more confident when practicing her craft and protecting her writing, and the male voices in the looking glass are simply white noise.

Notes

1 The strong connection between Ellery Queen and *Murder, She Wrote* is explored in Peter Fischer's *Me and Murder, She Wrote* (2013), as well as in "Murder, Mayhem and Clever Branding: The Stunning Success of J.B. Fletcher" by Rachel Franks and Donna Lee Brien in the collection *Serial Crime Fiction: Dying for More* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) edited by Anderson, Miranda, and Pezzotti. A helpful reference to other 20th-century crime television shows is Vincent Terrace's *The Television Crime Fighters Factbook* (McFarland, 2004).
2 *Women Times Three* was published in 1995, while *Murder, She Wrote* was in its 11th season.
3 As an older, female amateur detective, Jessica Fletcher has been compared to Miss Marple—the show itself was named for a film version of a Miss Marple novel, *Murder, She Said*—but as a writer, she's really in the Agatha Christie role, as Peter Fischer notes and Mark Aldridge explores in depth elsewhere in this volume.

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2 Women Writing for Television's Woman Writer

The Fourteen Women Writers of *Murder, She Wrote*

Kristi Humphreys

Murder, She Wrote is well-known for its popularity and longevity, but the contributions of women television writers specifically to the series deserve close examination. Of the 264 episodes, 28 are written or co-written by women television writers.[1] Thus, just 10.6% of *Murder, She Wrote* episodes were written or co-written by women; yet, when fandom websites rank episodes by popularity, women-written episodes dominate proportionally. For example, when *Screenrant.com* ranks the 10 best Cabot Cove episodes, 50% were written by women, and when *IMDB.com* lists the top 10 most popular episodes, 30% were written by women, with "Murder Takes the Bus," co-written by Maryanne Kasica, ranked as the most popular of all episodes. More importantly, the episodes are unique within the full series for their treatment of women's issues. This study contends that the women writers of *Murder, She Wrote* shaped characters in ways that were more faithful to experience,[2] and uses seven categories to organize the analysis: respect and the aging woman, sexual desire and innuendo, feminism, career women, housework, tough issues, and friendship to support this assertion.

Methodology

I have extracted the parts of each episode that fit into these categories. Some episodes can be found in all categories, and others meet the criteria of a few. The number of examples and the inclusion of a multitude of dialogue excerpts might seem exhaustive, but it is the most effective way to give voice to each writer individually, while also making observations of their collective similarities. Using characters, plot, and dialogue, the women writers of *Murder, She Wrote* appear to have served as conduits through which real-life women's issues naturally entered into a larger conversation. The best way to support this assertion involves highlighting the appropriate parts of the episodic examples.

"Look, Lady": Respect and the Aging Woman

In nearly every episode of *Murder, She Wrote*, characters address Jessica Fletcher by saying, "Look, lady." Whether this is a detective, a businessperson, or a bus driver, phrases like "stay out of this, lady" or "go back to writing, lady" clearly

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function to shape Jessica as a "nosy busybody" and to remind her that her place, especially as an older woman, is to mind her own business. Characters recognize Jessica as a famous author wherever she travels globally, but in these "look lady" moments, she is always dismissed as some unknown generic "lady." This is not the case in episodes written or co-written by women. Of the 28 episodes, only a few[3] refer to Jessica in this way. In these episodes, characters call her "Jessica," "J.B.," Mrs. Fletcher," "Jessie," or "ma'am." In fact, one episode takes this respect dynamic even further. In "An Egg to Die For," Sergei Nemiroff, a Russian Sergeant, has traveled to the US in search of the "Midnight Egg," a Fabergé egg that has been stolen from his country. He befriends Jessica at a book fair, and when the investigating Lieutenant tells Jessica to "stay out of this, lady," Sergei (in handcuffs) says, "Lieutenant, you will treat this woman with respect or I will take care of you." Whereas this may seem like a minor detail, the prevalence of "look, lady" in 12 series of episodes sets the stage for the following analysis.

Ageism and beauty expectations are certainly topics the women writers focus on in their writing. In the episode "If it's Thursday, It Must be Beverly" ("Beverly"), Jessica discovers that Jonathan Martin, a married police officer in town, is having affairs with different women on each night of the week (e.g., Thursday is Beverly's day to be with him). Jessica presses stylist Loretta for explanations of her whereabouts, while Mr. Martin's wife was murdered. Loretta tries to make up excuses but finally relents, admitting to getting collagen injections, saying, "At my age in this world with no husband, I just can't afford to get old. Please don't tell anyone." In the same episode, when another local woman, Beverly, is questioned about the murder, she responds, "It was good clean sex once a week. I'm not ashamed of it either!"

The "Beverly" episode is just one example, though. The "Seal of the Confessional" episode addresses sexual harassment between older man Evan West and the younger daughter of his new wealthy wife, Doris West, who is disabled. When Evan is found dead, Sheriff Amos Tucker even makes the comment to Jessica, as she considers the case, "Forgive my bluntness ma'am, but his wife is home in a wheelchair. Now forgive me ma'am but my guess is that he wasn't having too much fun at home." The stepdaughter, Kelly, admits the harassment has been happening for 8 years; she was forced to escape it by attending boarding school away from home. In addition to the episode's writing about issues of sexual harassment between older men and younger women, the dialogue reflects the opinion that if a woman is in a wheelchair, she will not be able to satisfy her husband. Doris confirms this expectation to Jessica: "I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to make him happy." The writers grapple with very difficult conversations surrounding age, harassment, and discrimination.

Sexual harassment and age are addressed even more explicitly in "The Legacy of Borbey House." A young teenager, Molly, is being sexually harassed by an older man, Lawrence Baker, who has just moved to Cabot Cove. When Baker stops by Molly's father's shop, where she works, the father yells, "She's

engaged to be married. You're old enough to be her father. Leave her alone and get out!"

Finally, in "If the Shoe Fits," Marla, a single mother, works in a shoe factory for a living. Marla is behind on her rent to her landlord, Jack Franzen, and he stops by the warehouse and flirts inappropriately with Marla. "Let's you and I talk about your rent." Marla repeatedly rejects his advances; he tells her, "Sweetheart, you don't get it. You're running out of excuses. If money is a problem, don't worry. I'll figure out a way you can square me." Considering these examples, it is clear these women writers had important issues of aging, beauty expectations, and relations between older men and younger women on their minds. Interestingly, while Jessica will visit the beauty parlor, her character rarely involves elements of aging and beauty, unless it pertains to solving a case. She is portrayed as confident and comfortable in her own skin. In this way, she is shaped to function as a "unique" example of an aging career woman, not just a typical one.

Sexual Desire and Innuendo

The series is brimming with examples in this category. Because this is uncommon, I will begin with an episode that reflects Jessica's own sexual needs. In the "Beverly" episode, Jonathan Martin visits Jessica, who is busy writing, to ask for her help in proving his innocence in the murder of his wife. Jessica says she has been working so long that she has a stiff neck. Jonathan says he has just the cure for that stiff neck, and they sit on the couch together. Jonathan begins rubbing Jessica's shoulders and asks, "Does that feel better?" She moans, "Oh, Mr. Martin, Oh my Goodness. Oh, Yeah, oh, feels wonderful, my husband used to do this for me all the time. Yeah, oh, that's the spot there. Oh, you have the most wonderful hands." She begins to enjoy it too much (in her mind), panics, quickly stands, and ushers him out. She is seemingly alarmed by her own ability to feel sexual desire and potentially enjoy sexual desire, even though that desire is coupled with a need to avoid anything inappropriate. These women writers were quite brave in shaping an older widow character as a realistic person who can still get aroused and arouse others. Additionally, in this episode, Jessica and Sheriff Tupper go to the police station to examine one of the phone call logs; they find that Eve Simpson has been calling Jonathan to get her cat out of the tree every Tuesday for weeks. Jessica reveals they have discovered her weekly calls to Jonathan about her cat. Eve replies, "Well, she is a *very bad* cat, and Mr. Martin seems to have a way with her." Amos and Jessica look at each other, fully understanding the innuendo. Finally, for this episode, Dr. Seth Hazlitt is speaking to Jessica and Amos about Jonathan's role as a Cabot Cove deputy: "Now, I know Jonathan was supposed to be servicing the town at night, but don't you think this is going a bit far?"

In the episode "Murder Digs Deep," Jessica is visiting Seth at an archeological dig when Karen Parker greets her upon arrival. Karen is a graduate student who is participating in the dig to earn a fellowship. Karen and Jessica

are sharing a tent; Karen says to her, "I hope you don't mind roughing it." Jessica responds, "Oh, the rougher the better," and Seth gives her a look of surprise at the meaning.

"Alma Murder" provides a more comedic example of how writers use innuendo. The episode begins with Jessica on the phone with Seth. At the same time, she has Hank Pruett inspecting the basement, which has two inches of water. Hank comes up to give the assessment: "Well, Jessica, looks to me like you've got dry rot and corroded plumbing." Jessica gives a wide-eyed look. Hank responds, "Of course, I'm only talking about the house, you understand?" I want to note here how the responses of Jessica and Seth to innuendos in general have a great deal to do with how the viewer consumes them. In the same episode, a Delta Alpha Chi sister, Emily, calls Jessica to tell her a beloved Professor Leon Walker has been arrested for murder. Jessica flies out. As Jessica and her sisters work on the case, Jessica meets an old boyfriend from college, Paul Robbins, who is now the Attorney General. He immediately asks her to dinner; there, they are remembering when he took her to homecoming but forgot his wallet at dinner. She says, "Luckily the manager's son was pledging your fraternity or else we may have found ourselves washing dishes to this day." Paul replies, "I don't know; I kind of like the image of you and me up to our elbows in hot greasy suds … *together*." Jessica's responding facial expression indicates that she understands and is amused by the innuendo.

Finally, "From the Horse's Mouth" presents a scene where private investigator Harry McGraw visits Althea Mayberry to find out whether or not she uses hair dye. (The murder victim was found with traces of dark brown hair dye.) Althea has been making passes at Harry throughout their time together. Once he is at her place, she offers him a drink and begins to come on to him. Althea says, "how would you like to slip into something a little more comfortable?" Harry knows he is at her place, not his, so he responds, "Like what?" Althea just raises her eyebrows flirtatiously, and he acknowledges the sexuality in her meaning. This is one of the edgier examples of innuendo in *Murder, She Wrote*, but provides another example of how women television writers were taking risks and staying true to the experiences of actual women, even those that are erotic, forward, and suggestive in nature.

Feminism

Regarding the various layers of the feminist movements, "Beverly" provides the most explicit example of how women contemplate these ideas. The episode begins in the beauty parlor. The women are gossiping with each other about husbands and divorce – something they seemingly do often considering how comfortable their banter is portrayed. The postman enters and announces that it is lottery day and time to buy some tickets. Ideal Mallow mentions, "I must say I feel like I'm going to get lucky today," to which she receives the response, "Oh, Ideal, you haven't gotten lucky since your husband left you." None of the ladies disagrees with this assessment. Another

woman chimes in with "unlike you, Eve, who soaked your husband for all he was worth." Eve retorts, "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot you feminists don't believe in alimony." Ideal finishes the conversation: "Oh, I believe in alimony; I just believe in sisterhood more." This scene reveals a great deal about women's issues at the time and how women television writers were representing those issues. Obviously, *Murder, She Wrote* aired decades after 1950s shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*, where viewers would be hard-pressed to find examples of feminist conversations such as this. Still, popular shows from previous decades, even those that emphasized women's roles as wife and mother alone, almost always depicted the importance of bonds and sisterhood to the wives; however, these sentiments were rarely framed explicitly as feminism in a positive light. Furthermore, the women writers of "Beverly" use the stereotype of "beauty salon gossip" to make three significant observations: (1) women friends can trade snide comments in jest without being malicious or getting upset, (2) women are autonomous individuals who commonly deal with issues of divorce, alimony, and child support, whether they are spoken about comfortably or not, and (3) women are often well versed in current feminist issues within a framework that actually calls it feminism.

In "Dead Heat,"[4] Jessica is visiting her niece Tracy McGill, who is a horse-racing jockey. Tracy was asked to fill in for a sick fellow jockey and ride one of the prize-winning horses. The horse's manager, Jack Bowen, has instructed Tracy to do everything he tells her to do and never ask questions. He is soon found dead, and Tracy is blamed. When she phones her father, he wants to fly in to help her immediately. Jessica takes the phone from Tracy and reminds him that they are perfectly capable of handling this themselves. She says goodbye and hangs up. "Just what we need, a hysterical father."

Sexism is addressed in "From the Horse's Mouth." Horse trainer Derek Padley is wrapping the ankle of King Paragon, another prize-winning horse, when Jessica and veterinarian Dr. Christie Morgan arrive. Christie tries to help by offering to take x-rays of the ankle or use a machine to get the swelling down, but Derek calls Christie "Miss," instead of Dr., and will not let her treat the horse. Christie walks away, saying to Jessica, "Translation? I don't trust a woman vet."

These episodes are also seasoned with moments of female empowerment, a subject that will be addressed at length later. In "Big Easy Murder," Jessica travels to New Orleans for research. Her friend Emily Broussard has married a Louisiana Senator, Brent Renwyck, but she entered the marriage with the majority of the money. Consequently, Brent has used much of her money to open a club and now is in much debt. In a conversation with Jessica, Emily admits how uncomfortable she feels not knowing exactly what is happening with their finances as a couple. Jessica advises her: "Don't be bamboozled, Emily. Don't look to Brent or anyone else for answers. Look to yourself. Take control of your own life." Emily displays visible relief when it occurs to her that she has the right to audit her own finances.

Jessica gives similar advice and empowerment in "Love's Deadly Desire." Marian King is the assistant to successful novelist Sibella Stone, who is visiting Cabot Cove on a book tour. Marian is a budding writer, so when she drops by Jessica's house, Marian asks if Jessica finds writing satisfying. Jessica replies, "I have found that writing becomes stale if I'm not stretching myself. I have to guard against slipping into patterns. I suggest just going out on your own and doing it. Nobody is going to do it for you." Similar to "Big Easy Murder," the episodes written or co-written by women give dialogue to Jessica that encourages other women to do things for themselves.

"The Witch's Curse" taps into more historical forms of feminism that still resonate today. Seth is holding auditions for a stage performance of the Cabot Cove Founders Day production of the Rachel Abbott Witch Trial. Most of the women are there to audition for the lead role, but then Mariah Osborne enters. She is new to Cabot Cove and is considered beautiful. She auditions and earns the lead role of Rachel. Mariah is so good in the role that others begin accusing her of being an actual witch. Mariah tells Jessica, "I think this town has a penchant for ganging up on innocent people." Then, during one rehearsal, Mariah goes off script and adds her own dialogues. Her castmate playing Judge Willard Clinton compliments this performance. Mariah is grateful and admits that she admires Rachel: "She stood up to the whole village." The Judge adds, "On the other hand, if she hadn't been so proud, she wouldn't have died so young." Mariah is quick to pounce on this unfair judgment. "It wasn't pride that killed her, Judge." This scene underscores the misperception that feminist women sought power and control over equality and respect. The community judges Mariah because she is autonomous, talented, sexy, and opinionated. Jessica speaks her mind frequently,[5] and her views are often welcomed by others. The main differences involve age and appearance. Because Mariah is young and beautiful, her autonomy and outspokenness are seen as inappropriate. Jessica's position as an older widowed woman makes an important point about reality: it more acceptable for an older widow to be smart and candid than for women who are youthfully beautiful and boldly autonomous.

Housework and Domesticity

This category is included because many women-written episodes contain a great deal of men (mainly Seth) performing housework, implying that all roles can be shared. In "Beverly," Jessica meets up with Seth, who suggests to her, "You know that Italian recipe I've been wanting to try? I have an idea. Why don't we try it out tonight. I'll do the shopping; I'll even do the cooking; all you have to provide is the kitchen." In the kitchen, Seth is wearing an oven mitt and stirring the sauce saying, "this is the most tantalizing taste …." Jessica finishes the sentence: … "taste treat you have ever tempted me with? That's what you said the last time when you made the chicken Veronique." Seth follows with, "Now, Jessica Fletcher, you and I both know that … very mild case of food poisoning had nothing to do with my cooking. Those chickens were

probably just sitting in the market for a week, that's all." At the conclusion of the episode, Seth is cooking again in Jessica's kitchen, stirring the sauce and baking bread.

The most popular episode according to *Imdb.com* is "Murder Takes the Bus." Jessica and Amos are taking a bus to a conference, when weather forces the bus to stop at the Kozy Korner Kitchen, which is run by Ralph Leary, a man who wears an apron and is a cook, owner, waiter, and bartender. When Jessica orders, she orders hot tea and says, "Well, I couldn't help but notice that apple pie over there. It looks homemade." Ralph responds proudly, "My own recipe." Amos asks him to make it two, and he does. When Jessica tries the pie, she finds that "Our host is quite a baker." Amos says, "Yeah, could have used a touch more cinnamon." Here, we have a man who not only cooks but also bakes well and is proud of it. Amos also presents himself as somewhat of an expert on flavor – all contributing to further representations of men performing tasks related to housework and domesticity.

Career Women

One unique feature of the show is that almost all women characters work professionally.[6] Obviously, the show is centered around a famous woman writer, but supporting characters are also in successful careers. Eve runs her own real estate firm, Loretta is a stylist at her own salon, and Phyllis owns a travel agency. In "Benedict Arnold Slipped Here" (1988), Phyllis comments on the expectation of women inhabiting private spheres and males functioning in the public. She admits to Jessica that she has been meaning to thank her because she (Jessica) was such an inspiration to her when her husband Barry died; seeing the way Jessica stood on her own two feet inspired her (Phyllis) to keep their travel agency and run it by herself.

Returning to "If the Shoe Fits," Marla not only stitches shoes to support her son as a single mother but she also requests time off to take an interview for a better position in Portland. She makes it clear she wants to create a better life for her son, and that involves furthering a career.

The topic of career women from a man's perspective is explored in "One Good Bid Deserves a Murder." When Albert Cromwell, a warehouse worker at the art auction, is questioned about killing his actress ex-girlfriend, Evangeline, he says, "We were going together a long time before she became famous, but her career, well, that came first; that meant she had to be seen with all the right people … so she dumped me and went off looking for fame." In this way, J. Miyoko Hensley and Steven Hensley address the stereotype that career women are either selfish by nature or are forced to be selfish, rather than just ambitious or motivated, to have the careers they desire; additionally, it speaks to the fact that women often find it challenging to have both career and family.

Other examples include Molly working as an interior designer in "The Legacy of Borbey House," Karen Parker seeking a graduate degree in "Murder Digs Deep," Miriam Radford serving as a full-time librarian in "Murder Takes

the Bus," Jessica's friend running her own English Department in "Alpha Murder," Rosemary Taylor and her daughter running the local *Gazette* in "Shear Madness," Gloria going into business as co-owner at Owens Shoes in "If the Shoe Fits,"[7] and the women television producers in "Proof is in the Pudding." The multitude of women characters in careers, high-ranking positions, ownership situations, and with advanced levels of education conveys the extent to which it must have been significant for women writers to give voice to this aspect of female experience.

"Proof in the Pudding" is about Bernardo Bonelli's Italian cooking show. His co-investor is Lorna Thompson, a woman who spent her savings to invest in the project. Bernardo is having Jessica on as a guest, and they are making a recipe from her latest novel ("but without the cyanide"). The station manager's wife, Diane Weaver, has a show of her own. She reviews restaurants, so Diane has a lot of power. Bernardo continually rejects her advances, and she reminds him of the power she has to ruin him – a twist from what we have seen in other episodes when it is the men reminding women of their (men's) power. Bernardo's niece and nephew, Jeanine and Phillip, run the actual restaurant, but Jeanine handles the business side, including the banking and accounting. What is significant in the one episode Seidman wrote is that we typically see only white male detectives or male detectives, in general. "Proof in the Pudding" includes an African American woman as Detective Mackenzie – a character that will be discussed in greater detail later.

It is worth giving a bit more attention to the episode "Coal Miner's Slaughter." The owner and boss of a coal mine, Tyler Morgan, is holding a celebration for his workers. He gives a speech saying it was a year of record productivity: "What's good for the mine is good for the miners." A young woman, Molly Connors, yells from the crowd: "It's a lie, and you know it." Tyler responds, "I don't believe we've met, young lady." "Actually, we have," she says. "Ten years ago at my father's funeral. I'm Molly Connors." Tyler remembered her as "Joe's little girl," and condescends, "Well, well, well. You sure have turned into a right fine filly, young lady … Am I right boys?" All the men whistle and heckle. Molly reveals that while she was away, she managed to get her a law degree and pass the bar exam. Tyler replies, "If you've come back to Colton looking for business, you're apt to find the pickings mighty slim." Molly tells him that she already has her first case: "I intend to prove that you killed my father," to which Tyler responds, "Well, Miss Molly, you're going to have a hard time trying to prove what never happened, especially from inside a jail cell. Sheriff, I want this woman arrested. Now, Miss Connors, a bright young lawyer like you ought to know that busting in on a private party being held on private grounds constitutes trespass." It is interesting that Tyler's initial way of dealing with Molly as an educated, bold, and confident new lawyer is threefold: he compares her to livestock – a filly; he focuses on her sexuality; then he calls everyone to join him in reducing her to her looks. The undertones of these choices would likely have been very significant parts of reality for women television writers, a topic that is further discussed later.

Tough Issues

Important, often stigmatized, issues are explored in several episodes as well. In "Murder Digs Deep," Jessica finds the first ancient artifact in the archeological dig, but the investor and "man in charge," Gideon Armstrong, does not want a press conference. He wants to keep the discovery quiet for the time being. Raymond Two Crows is a Native American who has been assisting with information about his history and is upset with Armstrong's decision, demanding sarcastically, "That's a good idea, Mr. Armstrong. Keep this discovery a secret. That way you can steal more of my people's heritage before anyone has a chance to complain." Armstrong quickly replies, "You're mistaken, buddy boy. This land belongs to a Santa Fe lawyer. Your ancestors were evicted from these premises a long time ago."

One of the several episodes occurring in convents or churches, "Old Habits Die Hard" addresses the topics of sin, change, and forgiveness. Sarah Bates is a former convent student, and she returns on a bus, dressed in a way that would be considered sexy. Some of the nuns do not want her to return, but when Jessica talks with her, she displays a changed heart. "I hated her (Miss Emily) for sending me to prison, but I got a lot of help there and got better; she saved my life, so I wrote Miss Emily to thank her but they wouldn't let my letters get to her. I just kept getting the letters back unopened. So I decided that when I got out I would visit the convent."

Chris Manheim wrote an additional episode that examines issues of racism – issues Jessica is quick to correct. In "The Curse of the Daanav," Seth's brother, Richard Hazlitt, has just married a much younger Alice, and they are holding a wedding celebration. One of the attendants is Vikram Singh, the cultural attaché for his country's embassy in Washington. Jessica introduces him to Alice's father, who mentions how much he loved that film *Gungha Din*. Jessica is not pleased, but then a murder occurs, so Lieutenant Ames arrives. Ames whispers to Richard's "vulture-like" kids, Carolyn and Mark, "Check on this Singh. See if he was involved in those Muslim protest demonstrations a couple of weeks ago." Jessica intervenes gracefully: "Forgive me, Lieutenant; Mr. Singh mentioned he had attended a festival of Diwali last year, which if I remember correctly would make him a Hindu, not a Muslim." Much later, the Lieutenant asks Jessica, "Who are you with? That bit about Muslims and Hindus, dead giveaway, which is it? FBI or CIA?"

Finally, the episode "Shear Madness" explores mental illness. Jessica's cousin Ann is getting married in Texas, so Jessica attends. Ann's brother George is in a mental hospital, and Ann wants to make sure he does not attend the wedding; she fears he will ruin it. The mental hospital Chief of Staff, however, has just reviewed George's case and decided to release him, so George appears at the wedding. George is called names like "psychopath" or "crazy" because he was found guilty of murdering Ann's former fiancé years ago. Once again, someone says they understand who he is and what he has gone through because she saw *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. George is ultimately revealed to have been framed, but the episode clearly explores the stigma surrounding issues of mental illness.

Friendship and Empowerment

Friendship and empowerment are topics that are considered on some level in each of these episodes. Jessica Fletcher is a very good friend, confidante, and motivator to other women – a depiction that is realistic and refreshing. My analysis could include an example of this from every episode, but I will limit it to three of the strongest. In "Lone Witness," Jessica is writing from her New York City apartment. She has a rather shy and awkward Cabot Cove friend, Susan Wells, who is a very talented cook and often creates meals for Jessica, Seth, Sheriff Mort Metzger, and others. Jessica convinces her to write and publish her own cookbook, and she encourages Susan to come to New York, use her kitchen to develop and test recipes, and hold a dinner party for a publisher. Susan is clumsy and nervous in the kitchen, but even though Jessica is very busy writing, she continues to help and motivate Susan. By the end of the episode, Susan has a book contract. Similarly, in the popular episode "Who Killed J.B. Fletcher," Marge Allen, a fan, impersonates Jessica and is later arrested under the name "Jessica Fletcher." Jessica visits Marge's town to clear things up, but when she arrives at Marge's home, she finds the "Jessica Fletcher Fan Club" comprises five women who are "big fans." They soon learn that Marge has died in a car accident, but their instincts tell them something nefarious has occurred. Instead of being frustrated or bitter, Jessica is depicted as a helper, and she works with the five women, supporting them to use their individual strengths to contribute to a collective goal, to solve the murder. Women working together toward a goal is a common aspect of real-life experience, and episodes such as this reflect these realities.

Finally, perhaps the most effective example of the unique contributions of these women writers involves the aforementioned Detective MacKenzie in "Proof in the Pudding." Most episodes of *Murder, She Wrote* present a detective, lieutenant, or sheriff character who is male and condescends harshly to Jessica when she attempts to help with investigations. First, when Jessica asks MacKenzie, an African American woman, if she can see evidence or speak with the victim, instead of "stay out of this, lady" or "leave the detective work to the professionals," MacKenzie says, "I don't see why not." There is a moment when MacKenzie gets frustrated with Jessica who is at the crime scene without permission, but the ending of the episode is most significant when it comes to how women writers write about women. Jessica has just solved the case, and MacKenzie finds her in the kitchen of Bonelli's cooking show. MacKenzie says to her, "Well Mrs. Fletcher, there's a kitchen; where's the crow? Isn't that what you are going to make me eat?" Jessica responds with a smile, "How about some dip instead?" The episode ends with the women snacking and chatting as friends.

I end with this because even though these writers thwart many stereotypes regarding women, perhaps the most important one involves the relationships between and among women. In these episodes, we do not find women who

are inherently competitive with each other; rather, these depictions are truer to experience – a quality that underscores the significance of including women writers in television in general.

Discussion

Whereas many books have been published about women working in the film industry, a surprisingly small number of books about women writing for television exists. That said, one worth noting is Jennifer Keishin Armstrong's book *When Women Invented Television: The Untold Story of the Female Powerhouses who Pioneered the Way We Watch Today*. Armstrong's work focuses on four talented women writers of the earlier days of television, but the book provides important details that inform this study. Armstrong reveals how women were prevalent industry professionals in the early days of television but were pushed out of these roles. "Men flooded the industry and took over many of the jobs women had been doing when, in the mid-1950s, television became big business …"[8] Armstrong also discusses how women in the industry were forced to defend any life choices that differed from prescribed social norms or expectations. Most importantly, the author reveals the drastic decline of women working on creative teams in television after the 1950s and 60s: "… the creative teams behind the handful of scripted, serialized, prime-time shows in 1949–1950 were about 25 percent female … That would drop over the next few decades to a dismal 6.5 percent in 1973—a time when the growing women's movement forced Hollywood's Writers Guild of America to undertake such a count at all; in the years between, no reliable statistics are available"[9] (2021, 12).

Things have improved and continue to progress, but the lack of women writers in the 1980s–1990s is still startling when compared to earlier years. For example, since *Murder, She Wrote* was among the top 10 most popular shows of the 1980s, it is worth examining the numbers of women writers of other shows that fall within that category. The first seasons of *Who's the Boss* (1984–1992), *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), and *Growing Pains* (1985–1992) provide helpful statistics for comparison regarding *Murder, She Wrote*. For *Who's the Boss*, 40% of the writers were women, and 63.6% of the episodes involved women writers on some level. For *The Cosby Show*, the numbers are 20% and 12.5%, respectively. Whereas for *The Golden Girls*, 37.5% of writers were women, these women contributed to the writing of an impressive 60% of episodes. And for *Growing Pains*, 23.8% were women, writing for 31.5% of the episodes. *Murder, She Wrote* adds nuance to these examples because all of them are comedies, and even though there are comedic moments in the show, it is not written as a comedy. Thus, the women writers of *Murder, She Wrote* were taking on serious women's issues, in profound ways, without the use of jokes to make the issues potentially more palatable, and they did so as only 10.6% of the writing staff. This detail is significant to this study because it underscores how essential it is to focus more research

on the specifics of the actual work they produced, in addition to the women themselves. This provides crucial insight regarding their knowledge of and roles within the most important dialogues involving women's issues of the day.

American novelist William Faulkner once said that writers can write about what is beyond their experiences, but the only terms with which they know to write are going to be within their experiences. These women writers wrote from their experience and observation as women. They carved a space within a popular television show for larger conversations about important issues. In this way, these *Murder, She Wrote* episodes highlight the fact that the inclusion of women in the practice of television writing is not just important; it is essential.

Notes

1 A full list of episodes is provided in the Works Cited list.
2 "Old Habits Die Hard" (written by Chris Manheim) features nuns who make inappropriate jokes and even gossip. (Rather than create stereotypical nuns, Manheim wrote them as both nuns and human beings.)
3 "Coal Miner's Slaughter," "Dead Heat"
4 In this episode, the detective tells Jessica to "go home and leave the detective work to the officials." A version of this occurs in almost every episode, but episodes such as this make the condescension a bit more biting.
5 Whereas there are many examples of this, a good one is "It's a Dog's Life." Jessica says angrily to a sheriff, "Sheriff, I don't know what these vultures of this county see in you but I know what I see: a man of very limited vision saddled with a gossip monger's mentality." The sheriff replies, "That's just fancy talk ma'am."
6 Other examples include Tracy McGill as a jockey in "Dead Heat," Dr. Christie Morgan as a veterinarian and horse ranch owner in "From the Horse's Mouth," the woman sergeant and woman head "techie" in "Mrs. Parker's Revenge," Priscilla Dauphin as the Julliard-trained jazz singer in "Big Easy Murder," Monica Evers as a flight attendant in "Lone Witness," Sibella Stone as a novelist in "Love's Deadly Desire," and Dr. Sylvia Dunn as a psychiatrist in "One Good Bid Deserves Another."
7 Gloria's husband has recently passed. She says that she has always been into business, but her husband would never let her.
8 Armstrong, *When Women Invented Television*, 13.
9 Armstrong, *When Women Invented Television*, 12.

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3 *Murder, She Wrote*

Bridging the Gap between the Golden Age and Cozy Mysteries

Phyllis M. Betz

As an upbeat instrumental begins, the viewer sees a middle-aged woman riding her bicycle through a small coastal town. The scene reflects a standard portrait of such a community: a small harbor where working and pleasure boats are moored; well-kept houses fronted with gardens; a main street lined with small stores. As the cyclist rides through the town, she waves at friends and neighbors going about their daily routines. Viewers also see this woman walking along the shoreline seemingly mulling over some problem; since she is holding a pencil, a viewer could surmise she is thinking about some writing project. This is affirmed as this montage ends with the woman pulling the last page of a manuscript from her typewriter with a pleased look.

Murder, She Wrote, starring Angela Lansbury as Jessica Fletcher, aired on CBS television from 1984 to 1996. The series presented a weekly murder investigation by Fletcher, a retired high school English teacher turned mystery novelist and accidental detective. At its peak, the show "became one of the most successful and longest-running shows in the history of television, averaging 30 million viewers in its prime" (McNamara). The show's success can be attributed, first, to Angela Lansbury, an actor whose talents ranged from film, to theater, to television. She brought to the character the vibrancy and intelligence that allowed viewers to accept Jessica's ability to investigate and solve murders. The second reason for the show's continued high ratings rested on its effective use of the conventions of the detective genre. The narrative arc of every episode followed the standard investigative pattern—a death by murder of, usually, an outsider; the involvement of Jessica in the investigation; a series of missteps until, through her ability to put together seemingly disparate pieces of evidence, Jessica reaches the correct solution. In addition to following the requirements of the traditional detective story, *Murder, She Wrote* crystalized a format that became the key signature of what would become the cozy mystery. The essential question of this essay is how does *Murder, She Wrote* connect the traditional Golden Age detective novel, a critically respected narrative, to the contemporary cozy mystery?

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Golden Age Foundations

The major literary conventions of the Golden Age novel reflect a synthesis and clarification of early detective narratives, bringing a "coherence and a self-consciousness" absent from previous writers' work (Knight, 2004, p. 86). These include an emphasis on murder as the instigating factor for the investigation, a restricted, often isolated, setting, and characters who share social backgrounds that limit racial and class differences. In addition, these novelists adhered to certain basic genre conventions in the construction and development of the plot: the death usually occurs at the beginning of the text; the author must play fair with the readers in laying out clues and motives; the investigation follows a pattern of elimination of suspects until the actual murderer is revealed; the result of the detective's efforts restores a sense of balance to the community.

The most important figure in any mystery novel, it can be argued, must be the detective; since the story's success rests on his or her ability to solve the crime, this character must embody the skills needed to bring about a positive outcome to the investigation. The detective in the classic novel is typically male, often a member of the police force, such as Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Roderick Allyn, a professional private detective, like Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, or a gifted amateur, like Dorothy L. Sayers's Peter Wimsey. Each detective pursues an investigation using mental acuity over physical means; they examine the scene, analyze the minutest details, and pull the evidence together to achieve the resolution to the crime. Their method relies more on questioning witnesses and acute observations of suspects' behaviors than more mundane investigative techniques. These figures are often presented as outsiders to the scene of the crime, partially from their position as a detective, but also for their perceived otherness and difference to the community: Poirot, the Belgian, whose mannerisms are seen as effete, for example. However, this distance allows these detectives to see the events and people surrounding the crime clearly, giving them an advantage that ultimately leads to the correct solution.

Although few, female detectives appear in Golden Age detective novels; Christie's Jane Marple the most famous. Like their male counterparts, these characters share certain qualities and behaviors. Most of these women are middle-aged or older; Christie's Tuppence Beresford being an exception. Their age allows them to fade into the background giving them the opportunity to observe the behavior of other characters. Miss Marple, and several of her fictional counterparts, become involved in a crime by proximity to the main events in the novel; not having the cachet of legal authority granted to the police or the hiring of a private detective, the woman's involvement in the investigation tends to be viewed as interference. Of course, her ability to piece together the various aspects of the situation through her keen observation and understanding of human nature ultimately brings the case to a positive close. Unlike several male detectives of this period, the women exhibit nothing out of the ordinary in their dress, mannerisms, or interactions with other characters. Their very ordinariness allows them to move through the investigation

because the rest of the characters see them as little more than old busybodies. A very limited number of women detectives during the period were professionals: Mary Roberts Rinehart's Hilda Adams; Patricia Wentworth's Maud Silver; and Gladys Mitchell's Dame Adela Bradley.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the female detective's character centers on her social status; she is most often presented as an unmarried woman typically living alone in a small community where she is a respected member. She is not a member of the gentry or aristocracy. Her life consists of daily chores and perhaps volunteering at the local church, being involved in the town's Women's Institute, and engaging in good works. Such a portrait tends to deemphasize any sexual aspect of their character and contributes to the belief that they have hardly any understanding of the wider world in which they live. However, Sally Cline says of Jane Marple that her "Sweet-seeming, placid nature conceals a mind that can effortlessly reveal the hidden depths of human evil" (p. 15). This description also fits the other spinster sleuths of this period, as their investigation exposes the passions and cruelty that have driven some other characters to murder.[1]

The classic female detective grounds her investigation on her knowledge of her environment and its inhabitants; Miss Maple often compares aspects of the crime to seemingly unrelated persons or events that have happened in St. Mary Mead: "Her village has been her experience, and it has provided her with knowledge of human nature and human actions" (Bargainnier, 1980, p. 67). The classic female detective lives in a world that allows her the opportunity to display her crime-solving abilities to the amazement of the other characters in the text. Their unique skills let them see beyond the surfaces of the small community in which they operate and determine the innocent and the guilty. In fact, it can be argued that the circumscribed environment of the classic detective story is essential, as it establishes a tightly controlled space for the detective to pursue the investigation. Stephen Knight uses the terms "enclosed" and "exclusive" to describe the classic detective novel's setting (2004, p. 87). A wider field of operation would dilute the power and impact of the crime itself as well as the pursuit of the criminal since the detective's efforts would be spread out over wider spaces and involve a greater number of suspects. In addition, since the women do not have the means, especially financial, they cannot pursue the case more strenuously. In fact, the small size intensifies the social connections and interactions of the inhabitants; everyone knows everyone and everyone's business, which can be of great use to the detective.[2]

The outward benign appearance of many female detectives of the Golden Age often distracts the other characters from these women's sharp intelligence and their ability to analyze and interpret the motives behind the crime. Many are described as older women with white hair styled in a conservative manner; either thin or comfortably built, they wear sensible clothing and shoes that are somewhat out of date. Their non-descript appearance allows them to fade into the background of the situation, which gives them the ability to participate in an investigation without seeming to actually do so. The characters, in some

way, can be seen as passively involved in the circumstances of the event. They sit, watch, engage in conversation; rarely do they take more aggressive actions as the investigation proceeds. As previously noted, the classic female detective becomes involved in the crime by accident; she happens to be at the scene when the crime is committed or notices some type of anomaly when a crime is discovered. Once involved, however, she is tenacious in pursuing her lines of inquiry and reaching the resolution of the crime.

The most common identification, and the personality traits attached to it, given to Miss Marple and other classic female detectives is spinster, a woman who has remained single and childless in a society that values marriage and family. Defined by Vanessa Shaw and Sabine Vanacker,

> The spinster is moral arbiter, curb of license and disorder, and image of repression; she is also what lies outside the normal expectations of a woman's life as it is lived in patriarchal society and although this diminishes her it also gives her the power of the abnormal over the normal to threaten, to judge, to undermine and to destroy [43].
>
> (Qtd, in Kungl, 2006, p. 115)

The physical description of the spinster, a small woman with an unassuming outward appearance, belies such an intense portrait of her social role. These figures may seem to be non-threatening, but their purpose, as described above, is to become arbiters of social behavior. As spinsters, the classic female detectives are not disturbed in the investigations because of romantic or sexual entanglements; indeed, the idea of Jane Marple as a sexual woman runs counter to how she is portrayed. This does not mean to suggest, however, that these women are not unaware of how passion motivates the act of murder, nor are they hostile to romance. Many of Christie's Jane Marple novels end with a developing attachment between younger characters and her approval, even encouragement, of such relationships.

Critics of the detective novel have offered various reasons for the dominance of the classic mystery during the inter-war years; as Stephen Knight notes, "the patterns of crime fiction are shaped by the dominant concerns of a period, and shaping power also rests in the means of publications, the types of audience, the social and contextual forces" (2004, p. 89). Economic, political, and social upheavals experienced after the First World War as well as the changes in gender expectations and roles dominate critical positions. At its peak, the classic mystery enjoyed wide popularity in England with novels by Christie, Sayers, and Allingham becoming bestsellers; in America, the classic novel also gained wide popularity with authors such as John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen, and Mary Roberts Rinehart.

While the classic detective story had not disappeared as an option for modern readers, other narrative formats have become more common since the years following the Second World War, including the police procedural (Ed McBain), the psychological thriller (Patricia Highsmith), and the suspense

novel (Charlotte Armstrong). By the 1970s, the detective genre has grown to include the forensic detectives of Patricia Cornwall and Kathy Reichs, Hannibal Lector, and other serial killers, as well as the true crime narratives of Truman Capote and Anne Rule. The development of female detectives who broke the mold of the genteel spinster made inroads into the popularity of the classic detective story; Sue Grafton, Maricia Muller, and Sara Paretsky upended the traditional portrait of a woman investigator. Notably, too, modern detective narratives have foregrounded an emphasis on violence and sexuality that were omitted or sublimated in the classic detective novel. Raymond Chandler's famous indictment of the classic Golden Age mystery in "The Simple Art of Murder" may also explain the decline in its dominance: "[T]hey do not come off intellectually as problems, and they do not come off artistically as fiction. They are too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on the world" (2005, p. 213).[3]

Murder, She Wrote Adaptations

Jessica Fletcher retains several important characteristics of her classic predecessors: She lives in a small community—Cabot Cove, Maine—whose inhabitants reflect a more traditional sense of the world and human relationships. Jessica, like Jane Marple and others, is a respected member of the town, having taught English in the town's high school for many years. She seems to have lived her whole life in Cabot Cove, which gives her a deep and intimate understanding of the people who are her neighbors. Most importantly, like her counterparts, Jessica reveals a sharp intelligence and analytic ability when murder intrudes into Cabot Cove's daily life. Jessica, like Miss Marple, is curious about the people in her environment and pays attention to what goes on around her. Her participation in an investigation generally begins by accident, either being on the scene when the crime occurs or knowing something about those involved that the sheriff might not. In some cases, Jessica's involvement is not welcomed by the police, but her discovery of the solution is always appreciated and creates a good relationship between them. While Jessica should be seen as a direct descendant of the Golden Age female detective, she embodies key traits that distinguish her from them. These are the attributes that will be expanded on in many of the cozy mysteries that began to appear when *Murder, She Wrote* ended its television run.

The differences between Jessica and her predecessors center on their appearance and personality. Although Jessica is middle-aged (at the beginning of the series she is said to be 58 years old), she does not fit the stereotype of the spinster detective. Jessica, it is important to note, is not a spinster; she is a widow who had been married for many years. Jessica is attractive and has often aroused the romantic attention of several men over the course of the series. At times in the series, Jessica is shown reciprocating these feelings, although she never commits to a long relationship with any of them. The wardrobes of the earlier women appear much more limited than Jessica's, the traditional tweeds

and sensible shoes of the period. While Jessica does not aspire to haute couture, she dresses fashionably and to suit any occasion, from gardening to formal dinners. She is also comfortable in most social situations, easily conversing with strangers and able to fit into whatever circumstances she finds herself. Jessica makes friends easily, a skill that becomes useful when she finds it necessary to rely on their help when chasing a suspect or gathering information. This easy social engagement is not as apparent in the earlier female detectives whose social circles are narrower and whose interactions remain limited.

One of the notable differences between Jessica Fletcher and the earlier women is her independence. A bestselling mystery writer, Jessica enjoys the freedom unavailable to her predecessors. Being economically stable, however, is not the only illustration of Jessice's independence; from the beginning, she has been presented as a woman who "understands her own worth" (McNamara). Jessica is confident of her investigative abilities and is not hesitant to challenge the views of the police. She often takes the initiative to follow up her theory of a case and willingly take risks in her pursuit of the perpetrator and has found herself threatened because of it. Where the earlier female detectives stay on the sidelines, Jessica actively participates in seeking the resolution to the murder investigation. Jessica does share the clear moral sensibility of her progenitors and typically acts not only in response to the crime but also to the social damage it causes. However, Jessica maintains a more positive attitude as she pursues an investigation unlike, for example, Miss Marple who is described as "ruthless" (Bargainnier, 1980, pp. 72–72) and "sceptical (sic) and "suspicious" (Cline, 2022, p. 50) about the world she inhabits. This may be because Jessica must maintain her ties to Cabot Cove since she plays an important role in the community; Miss Marple lives in St. Mary Mead but does not appear to enjoy the same intimacy with her neighbors who often dismiss her as a busybody. Although the show was never categorized as a cozy mystery during its television run, Jessica Fletcher set the standard for the later cozy writers to follow.

Cozy Reformulations

Murder, She Wrote ended its highly successful run in 1996 just when the cozy mystery was coming into its own as a mystery sub-genre.[4] The cozy replicates some of the characteristics of the classic mystery but realigns them to fit a contemporary audience. Unlike her Golden Age predecessors, the cozy detective is young—typically in her mid-thirties, although she can be older. She is attractive, but generally does not emphasize her looks. Her focus centers on running the small business she has started or inherited, which gives her the ability to determine her position in the community. Importantly, the cozy detective tends to be the owner of the business or works independently, which allows her the freedom to investigate the crime. Like Jessica, the cozy hero actively engages with others and deliberately decides to become involved in solving the crime. As in earlier narratives, the cozy detective is a woman who falls into

investigating a crime by accident, but often because someone she knows—a family member or friend—has been accused of the crime. The cozy hero also uses the skills or knowledge she has developed in her business to provide insight into the crime that the police may lack or give her access to places that the police do not have.

Marty Knepper points out that the modern cozy's main character combines traditional concepts of women's desires—a home and positive intimate relationships—with more modern ideas of self-sufficiency and self-determination. This is what distinguishes the modern cozy not only from the classic detective novel but also from Jessica Fletcher. Miss Marple has been shaped by a very traditional culture with strictly defined expectations of what was appropriate womanly behavior; a woman solving murders clearly would not have been seen as suitable. The years in which *Murder She Wrote* appeared marked notable social changes regarding the private and public images of women; Jessica, however, if she is 58 when the series begins in 1984, grew up in a time when more conservative ideas about women still dominated, especially in a small coastal community like Cabot Cove, Maine. When the series ended its run in 1996, the cozy was beginning to become popular. Earlier social shifts that promised women greater freedom, however, faced strong pushbacks: "Cozy writers of [the present] generation grew up in the 1990s, a virulently misogynist era, when 'girl power' meant buying makeup, not making political change, computers and media transformed our lives, and unregulated capitalism dominated American life" (Knepper, 2021, p. 34). Knepper posits that such cultural shifts contributed to the modern cozy's emphasis on a reimagining of women's lives that combined the best of a traditional view of women with the positive gains of the feminist movement.

A major distinction between both the classic female detective and Jessica Fletcher is that the cozy figure must become a member of the community in which she lives. Where Jessica Fletcher and Miss Marple are already integral members of their towns, the cozy woman must make connections with others whether she is moving into a new community or returning to her old home. Many first novels in the cozy series present the protagonist becoming integrated into the fabric of the town: Sarah Winston in Sherry Harris' Garage Sale series, for example, has moved from California to Massachusetts, lost her standing on the Air Force base after her divorce, and must readjust to the loss of status; however, she manages to feel at home by the end of the novel with the help of friends and new acquaintances. Sarah Winston is a professional garage sale organizer, which allows her to enter other people's houses when she evaluates their goods for sale; she also has a strong knowledge of antiques and collectibles, which helps in discovering fakes or stolen property and often provides the motive for a crime. Once part of the community, the cozy detective begins to create a social network that expands as she develops more intimate relationships with others.

While Miss Marple is given no romantic possibilities, Jessica Fletcher does have a more complete sexual history, having been married and widowed and

with a few men eager to pursue a more intimate relationship with her. Modern cozy protagonists, however, enjoy a more explicit romantic life; being younger and unattached or divorced, these women often have a wider sexual experience and are willing to express such feelings. Frequently the object of this desire is the police officer in charge of the investigation; in the beginning of their relationship, he finds her involvement a distraction to the primary concern, solving the murder. As many cozy series develop this initial hostility is breached and their feelings become mutual, and physical intimacy can appear—or be clearly hinted at—in the novel.

The investigative methods of the cozy protagonist, like her foremothers, rely on a combination of analysis and intuition. They are all keen observers of the lives and goings on in their communities; they evaluate the behavior of suspects and reach the correct outcome through an innate understanding of the impulses that have led to the crime. What differs between the earlier women's pursuit of the crime and the cozy hero is the degree of involvement with the wider community. Miss Marple is usually not seen interacting with other characters beyond the actual investigation. Whatever daily conversations or activities occur are omitted from the narrative. Jessica does have a stronger sense of connection to Cabot Cove's inhabitants; over the series several recurring characters appear whenever Jessica's sleuthing takes place in the town. Most cozy protagonists, because they are a part of the economy of the town, are continually involved with others. Leslie Budewitz's Pepper Reece, for example, is the owner of a spice shop in Seattle's Pike Place Market, and readers witness not only dealing with customers, but also Pepper and her employees mixing spice blends and testing recipes. Sometimes, the cozy detective does not own a business; rather, she may, like Peggy Erhart's Pamela Paterson, be a member of a group that shares the same hobby, in this case knitting. Here, the members become entangled in a murder when a woman who has joined the group to learn how to knit for the role of Madame LaFarge is murdered. As the group discusses the crime, Pamela discovers an important clue when examining the piece the victim had been knitting. In the cozy, investigations become collaborative efforts rather than the work of an individual. Both Miss Marple and Jessica work alone; the police, surprisingly, operate on the periphery of their sleuthing.

One attribute of the cozy missing from the classic detective novel is humor. From the punning titles to secondary characters who provide comic relief or the sometimes slapstick situations the protagonists find themselves in, the cozy novel uses comedy to humanize characters and to release the tension that is an inherent part of violent death. For example, in *Basil Instinct*, Eve Angelotta deliberately plays with the stereotype of the Italian mobster and his moll, using her cousin's physical size to intimidate two teenage boys who may have witnessed something important to the case. The humor comes not only from the incongruency between the performance and the setting, an upper middle-class suburb outside of Philadelphia, but also the gullibility of the young men, given the over-the-top acting of Eve and her cousin. Humor does appear in

the classic detective mystery, but generally it is relegated to subordinate characters and comes from those who are marginalized to the society portrayed in the novel or represent certain character stereotypes, like the haughty aristocrat. The major figures in these novels present themselves with the seriousness required of a murder investigation although some, like Peter Wimsey or Hercule Poirot, may play the part of an effete or out of touch dilettante to throw a suspect off.

Murder, She Wrote, as do many cozy mysteries, conveys the narrative with a lighter tone, even though a murder initiates Jessica's investigation. The humor, as in the cozy, appears in the show's use of regional and character stereotypes—the laconic Mainer or the busybody neighbor. What contributes to this paradox centers on the relegation of the violence connected with the murder to the margins of the scene. The actual murder frequently takes place off stage; all that appears is the body itself. This de-emphasizing of the physicality of death is also found in the classic detective novel. When a murder does occur in the cozy narrative, the manner of death can be so outrageous that it distracts from the horror of the event. Victims have died by traditional means—poisoning, stabbing, bludgeoning or shooting—and more arcane methods—being hit with a rolling pin, inhaling the dust a dangerously hot chili pepper, or discovered inside a painting after being struck by the metallic frame. Bodies disappear and reappear, suspects are chased through a German sausage festival, or a man dressed as Bridgette Bardot asks the protagonist for a date. Besides such comic events, Jessica's investigations and the cozy always end with the proper murderer identified and taken to jail. Typically, the victim of the crime is an outsider to the community and has some nefarious purpose behind their appearance in town. These narratives have a clear-cut moral view of the world, which reflects what Earl Bargainnier identifies as a key characteristic of the classic detective novel: "Classic detective fiction is basically a form of comedy in the original sense of that term. Whatever the perils of the events, all ends well, with the evil punished and the good triumphant" (1980, p. 17). Such is not always the case in classic detective novels, however, where a morally ambiguous outcome, like the guilty party sometimes escaping institutional justice, is presented at the conclusion of the novel. The happy ending of the cozy mystery signals this essential goodness of the protagonist and her community; the lines between right and wrong are clearly drawn and believed in.

Jessica Fletcher Meet Pepper Reese

Cabot Cove, ME does not exist; the seaside village's exterior shots seen throughout the series were filmed in Mendocino, CA. Interior and some exterior shots were filmed at the Universal studio lot. According to Wook Kim's article in *Time* from 2013, the town is based on the historic village of Castine, ME; however, jesmaine.tripod.com, a *Murder, She Wrote* fan site, posits Boothbay Harbor, ME, another mid-coastal Maine town, as the model for Cabot Cove. The houses tend to look the same, moderate in size, generally painted

white, often with porches. Jessica's house is one of the largest and most distinct, seemingly built in the nineteenth century. An interesting note is that the Blair House in Mendocino, an historic mansion, was used for the exterior of her house (Kim). The town center contains the bank, the sheriff's office and jail, and several shops; many of these buildings will be used throughout the series as scenes of the crime. When required by the script, other buildings will appear—a theater or a hotel, for example. As a result, Cabot Cove's landscapes and buildings present an obvious generic quality in their visual depictions.

Although the Seattle Spice Shop does not actually occupy a spot in the Pike Place Market, the Market and the surrounding areas that appear in Budewitz's novel, *Assault and Pepper*, are real places. This means that Budewitz cannot distort the geography of the setting too much; as she states in the opening historical note to the novel: "A writer setting a story in a real place must ask indulgence from readers who know and love it. I have attempted to be as accurate as possible [describing] the city where I imagine Pepper Reece and her friends at work and play" (ix). Some of the stores and stalls described in the novel are real places in the Market; others are products of Budewitz's imagination. The Market is an essential component in the development of the story, not only for providing an interesting setting and characters, but also for providing the unique community necessary for the cozy mystery. Unlike Jessica who, from the beginning of *Murder, She Wrote,* is already fully integrated into the life of Cabot Cove, Pepper in this novel is still finding a way to fit into the daily life of the Market. Where Jessica is a native of Cabot Cove, having lived there her entire life, Pepper has only been owner of the spice shop for about a year; she must still learn the explicit and implicit patterns that govern the operations and relationships of the Market community as well as making the store her own.

In the episode "The Sins of Cabot Cove," the key setting is Loretta's Beauty Parlor, gossip central of the town. The episode opens with the shop's regulars talking about the questionable behavior of various townspeople. Throughout the episode, the action returns to the shop as events play out; the show relies on the convention of the beauty shop as a place where women meet and comment on the goings on in the community. As Jessica and Sheriff Metzger investigate the murder, the beauty parlor becomes the central hub of the community's reaction. One of the shop's employees is revealed to be the source of information used by a former inhabitant of Cabot Cove who has written a thinly veiled fictional tell-all novel about the town, revealing some of its more sordid secrets. A second site, the town's bookstore, also plays a role in Jessica's reconstruction of the motive for the murder.

Sybil Reed, the author, returns to Cabot Cove and uses her novel to get revenge on those individuals she believes have ruined her life. At first, the entire town eagerly reads the book, looking for the real people behind the fictional ones. Jessica's role at the start of the episode is subdued; she is not interested in reading the novel, and only when Sybil forces her way into Jessica's home as a guest does Jessica's involvement take center stage. When Miriam Harwood is discovered murdered in her kitchen in a manner similar to the depiction

of a character in the novel, clearly a fictional version of her, Sheriff Metzger turns to Jessica because he knows that she will be able to help him discover the true culprit. Once she has read the novel, Jessica easily discovers who the thinly veiled characters are in real life, and, using her intuition and knowledge of the community's various interactions, she ultimately determines who the actual murderer is. She accomplishes this mainly by talking to suspects and, of course, takes part in the beauty parlor gossip. She can do this because Sheriff Metzger encourages Jessica to participate in the investigation. Interestingly, Metzger has only just become Cabot Cove's sheriff, so he depends on Jessica's understanding of the town's dynamics a great deal. Jessica's reputation as a solver of crimes is well-established when "The Sins of Cabot Cove" aired as part of Season Five of the series.

Because the body of the victim is found in the Spice Shop's doorway, Pepper feels compelled to become involved in finding the murderer, even though her ex-husband, a patrolman in the Market area, and the detectives investigating the death warn her to stay out of police business. A novel has the luxury of providing more complete descriptions of people and scenes and greater detail of the investigation, so readers are provided a fuller sense of the Market itself, the lives of several key characters, and Pepper's actions to find, not only the killer, but the motive behind the victim's death. Unlike Jessica, who as a writer can put down her work on a manuscript to pursue an investigation, Pepper must always keep the running of her store in mind during her efforts to find the murderer, especially as the discovery of the body and the police's continued interruptions have disrupted the shop's daily operations. However, Pepper is able to combine both efforts as the novel develops; she can retrace the steps of the victim, talk to various shop owners about the case while delivering orders, and rely on the help of her employees when necessary.

An important difference between *Murder, She Wrote* and *Assault and Pepper* arises from the way these narratives integrate a moral sensibility into the narratives. Jessica Fletcher is not given the same level of moral authority as the classic female detective—Miss Marple has been described as Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, in one novel. However, this is not to suggest that Jessica does not have a firm sense of what is right and wrong. When Sybil reveals her motives behind writing her novel, Jessica reminds her of the consequences that may and have resulted from the younger woman's desires. A member of Cabot Cove has died because of Sybil's innuendos, and the murderer has acted in an attempt to develop a relationship with the murdered woman due to the false reputation described in Sybil's novel. The series, however, does not examine such topics in depth and generally avoids exploring such concerns. Budewitz believes the

> modern mystery is a terrific vehicle for exploring social issues because it digs deep into character as well as plot and setting. The mystery hits on the uncomfortable places in life and society; it touches on the rub—where things go wrong and wrongs must be righted (2024, p. 89).

Among the daily inhabitants of the Market are several homeless men who Pepper becomes friendly with. One of these men has been accused of the murder, and Pepper's belief in his innocence in one of the major factors driving her to find the true killer. Throughout the novel, Pepper and others discuss the dilemmas these men face and how the revitalization of the area surrounding the Pike Street Market neighborhood has contributed to the situation. Pepper's role in discovering the actual perpetrator vindicates her conviction in Sam's innocence. The Spice Shop Mystery series introduces other social issues into the narratives, such as racial tensions that result from the Market's changing demographics, domestic abuse, or the economic ramifications of the covid pandemic.

The impact of *Murder, She Wrote* and its protagonist on cozy writers comes through clearly in these quotations about Jessica Fletcher. She

> truly embodies the best of the cosy protagonist. She's a real adult, with a full life. She redefines herself after crisis—being widowed—and great change—retiring from teaching. She is independent, yet she has a community. Wherever she goes, she uses her skills of observation, her understanding of human nature, and her connections to the community to solve problems.
>
> (Leslie Budewitz, 2023)

> The show takes itself very seriously, but with no real violence. It requires a certain amount of suspension of disbelief from the viewer—but not too much. … It offers a tight-knit supportive community in a location that is welcoming and somewhat idyllic. I intentionally incorporated all of these factors into my writing.
>
> (deBellegarde, 2023)[5]

Jessica Fletcher's place in the development of the female detective should be recognized for how the character takes the standard tropes of the classic female detective and reconfigures them for a new generation of writers. Jessica, like her predecessors, relies on her sharp observation of her surroundings and her understanding of what drives someone to commit a crime. She analyzes and evaluates what has happened at a crime scene and offers an interpretation that proves to be correct. However, unlike the earlier detectives, Jessica is a more active participant in an investigation: "Smart, sensible, a bit sassy, very literate and occasionally open to romance, Jessica Fletcher was not rumpled, haunted or conflicted" (McNamara). While the police might find her actions interference, her engagement with official law enforcement ultimately proves beneficial. Jessica has also managed to reach a higher social and economic position than earlier women through her own efforts: this allows her the freedom to pursue her own interests. Jessica sets a standard for the cozy writers who follow her; they have taken her view of her role in her community, especially

when it is threatened by crime, and brought it to a seaside bar in the Florida Panhandle, Seattle's Pike Place Market, a knitting club, and a food stall in a night market. They have integrated Jessica's honesty, compassion, and humor into their protagonists. While the cozy novel would most likely have developed without Jessica Fletcher, it would certainly have taken longer to become the publishing juggernaut that it now is.

Notes

1 Not all women detectives fit into this stereotype: Hilda Adams is a professional nurse who resides in a large city; Maud Silver, a retired governess, lives in London and works as a professional investigator; and Adela Bradley is a government psychologist. Tuppence Beresford over the course of her series marries and has children.
2 David Geherin describes the ways in which such a setting intensifies the impact of the crime on the community: "A murder in a small town not only reminds its inhabitants of their own mortality, it affects their relationships with one another" (2014, p. 8) as well as "lead to an exploration of social issues related to the crime—the importance of family the influence of the past, [and] the changing face of the community" (p. 9).
3 Interestingly, cozy mysteries have faced many of the same criticisms from contemporary reviewers and critics Geherin reflects the standard position on the cozy: "The murder is primarily an excuse for a puzzle that needs to be solved. … Everything is infused with a strong dose of nostalgia as these novels portray a quiet, peaceful world temporarily inconvenienced by the intrusion of an unpleasant crime that will soon be rooted out by the resident crime solver" (p. 4). The condescension in Geherin is clear.
4 For the best discussion of the history of the cozy mystery see Marty Knepper's essay "Contemporary Cozy Mysteries, Agatha Christies and the 1990s: Six Steps Toward a Definition," in *Reading the Cozy Mystery: Essays on an Underappreciated Subgenre*. Edited by Phyllis M. Betz. McFarland, Jefferson, NC. 2021, 17–49.
5 These statements are email responses to my question about the influence of *Murder She Wrote* and Jessica Fletcher on their careers.

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Part II

Jessica Fletcher, Gender, and Detection

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4 Misogyny She Wrote

How *Murder, She Wrote* Typifies the Backlash against Feminism

Mary P. Freier

When *Murder, She Wrote* premiered in 1984, critics hailed Jessica Fletcher as a positive depiction of an older woman in television, at a time when relatively few television series featured women as protagonists, much less older women. *Murder, She Wrote* is neither a police procedural nor a series with a private detective as protagonist. Jessica Fletcher is an amateur detective who always beats the professional detectives by solving the crime. Watching the show is still a pleasure, although twenty-first century viewers might find some elements from the period amusing, such as spiral perms and big shoulders on women's dresses. However, the show has some dated elements that are much more disturbing: the representation of women, women's issues, and feminism throughout the series. Examining the depiction of women in *Murder, She Wrote* shows us that the series exemplifies the backlash against feminism in the 1980s, as described by Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Faludi's study explained how the antifeminist backlash created a media that inflated the importance of flawed statistical studies on marriage and fertility, a climate that affected television series: "In prime-time television shows, single, professional, and feminist women are humiliated, turned into harpies, or hit by nervous breakdowns; the wise ones recant their independent ways by the closing sequence" (Faludi, 1991, p. xi). The increase of women as major characters in television series such as *thirtysomething* and films such as *Fatal Attraction* gave Faludi ample evidence to prove her case. Other scholars writing in the early to mid-nineties about this phenomenon, however, claim that it is not the antifeminist backlash that Faludi describes, that the claims of backlash misinterpret the concept of postfeminism.

As early as 1983, Judith Stacey warned feminists of postfeminism or a "backlash" against feminism. She describes a new conservative feminism, or postfeminism, promulgated by feminists like Betty Friedan, in her book *The Second Wave*. Stacey describes this postfeminism, which even antifeminists can endorse, as "a repudiation of sexual politics," the original feminist interest in transforming "gender and sexuality" in both private and public life. Postfeminists want to remove sexual politics from feminism, thus creating a more family-friendly feminism that would emphasize the differences between the genders, celebrating traditional feminine qualities and feminine roles. Small

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wonder that antifeminists might embrace it. Postfeminists also argue that the fight against "male domination" detracts and distracts from more important goals (Stacey, pp. 559–61). Eight years before *Backlash*, Stacey refers to this train of thought as a "backlash" to the original second-wave feminism that focused on sexual politics and examining gender roles within families and social orders (p. 574).

Forty years later, "postfeminism" can be defined in three different ways. Rosalind Gill points out that the term "postfeminism" could be "a theoretical stance, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance" (Gill, 2012, p. 136). In 1996, Bonnie J. Dow maintains that "some discourse that has been labeled 'backlash' is more fittingly labeled 'postfeminist,' a distinction recognizing that some discourse which questions certain feminist issues and/or goals assumes the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals" (p. 87). Thus, even if television programs rejected sexual politics, they portrayed a world in which women could work and be educated, both of which are indeed feminist goals. Dow distinguishes between backlash and postfeminism by claiming that postfeminism revises these goals by stripping them of political overtones, thus representing

> a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained …. At the same time, the most radical aspects of feminism, those centered in sexual politics and a profound awareness of power differences between the sexes at all levels and in all arenas, have been discarded as irrelevant or threatening. (pp. 87–88)

Susan J. Douglas, in her media history of the conflicting representations of women in television and advertising from the 1950s onward, acknowledges Faludi's point that the cultural climate of the 1980s had an impact on the programming of the 1980s, but notes that tensions between feminist portrayals of women and conventional portrayals date back to the origin of the medium (1994, pp. 12–13). Julie D'Acci, in her work on *Cagney and Lacey*, acknowledges a backlash against feminism, that the decade of the 1980s encompassed a good deal of change in views of women's issues, and that, although many women characters created in the 1980s differed radically from woman characters in the past decades, the antifeminist backlash influenced the depiction of women, simply because prime-time television executives preferred to keep their programs non-controversial (1992, p. 170). The portrayal of feminists as well as their goals also became negative since postfeminists believed the "negative stereotypes of feminists" (Dow, 1996, p. 93). Second-wave feminism became "irrelevant" to younger women, who believed that they lived in a world where a woman could achieve equal pay and status by working hard (Dow, 1996, 89). Younger women feared that feminism could mean that they might have to give up marriage and family (Dow, 1996, 92), concerns fed by irresponsible media reporting in the eighties, most notably on topics such

as the likelihood of women over a certain age ever marrying and whether or not women who focused on careers in their twenties would ever be able to have children (the infamous "biological clock") (Faludi, 1991, pp. 3; 27–32). Many believed that the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 had essentially eliminated the feminist movement.

However, a large number of women had entered the workforce because of the achievements of the feminist movement and had become a large and potentially profitable market for advertisers (D'Acci, 1992, p.177). So, in 1984 (the year that *Murder, She Wrote* premiered), "women had leading roles in eight of the twenty-two new prime-time series that fall. Network research had, apparently, discovered that there was a 'new woman' out there that television might want to represent and address." Representing these "new women" in a positive light seemed like an obvious way to success, and networks looked for ways to present "competent dynamic women" in their offerings (Deming, 1992, p. 204). However, despite their desire for "relevance and topicality," programmers still wanted women presented conventionally, that is, as "young, white, middle-class, stereotypically 'beautiful,' and demure." And they wanted to continue to show women primarily in relation to men, as "wives, mothers, heterosexual sex objects, subsidiaries to men, 'vulnerable', and 'sympathetic'" (D'Acci, 1992, p. 171). Thus, when presented with "relevant and topical" issues in their series' plotting, even the most "competent and dynamic" women characters would bow to the conventional in both behavior and role.

Murder, She Wrote received positive reviews immediately, with reviewers commenting on the excellence of the cast, the inventiveness of the plots, and the character of Jessica Fletcher (O'Connor). Scholarly acclaim for the character of Jessica as a representation of an older woman followed even before the series ended, citing her control over her own life, her mental acuity, her physical fitness, and her power to create novels and influence her community (Bell, 1992, pp. 308–09). Critical commentary as recently as 2014 maintains that Jessica is a positive representation of an older woman. Myrna A. Hant claims that Jessica still stands out because "Traditionally, to depict an older woman as an intellectually vital, sexually active, productive member of society in her own right is extremely rare" (Hant, p. 8). Hant celebrates both Jessica Fletcher and Miss Marple as "counter-hegemonic portrayals" of older women, citing their intellectual approach to solving mysteries, using "observation and keen insights into human behavior," and that they are "not marginalized and certainly not invisible." She claims that Jessica Fletcher is a "pioneer" for "the multi-dimensional female characters in the 21st century" (Hant, 2014, p. 9). Indeed, Jessica solves crimes that even the police of major metropolitan areas cannot, while maintaining a regular writing schedule. It's possible that some people thought that they were watching a series about women's equality, if not superiority, embodied in Jessica Fletcher.

However, Jessica Fletcher is not a feminist character, and the television world in which she exists is not a feminist world. Rather, it is the world of the antifeminist backlash, one where feminism is considered unattractive, even

with educated and ambitious woman characters whose opportunities were brought to them by the feminist movement. *Murder, She Wrote* is not postfeminist; it is antifeminist.

Jessica Fletcher is certainly not presented as a typical career woman. In the pilot, "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes," she describes herself as a retired substitute teacher, although later episodes describing her relationships with former students make it clear that she taught full-time. However, after her husband's death, Jessica began to write a mystery novel. The pilot portrays this new career as nearly accidental: Jessica began writing *The Corpse Danced at Midnight* as a way to work through her grief, her visiting nephew Grady found her manuscript, read it, and took it to New York to show it to a friend of his with connections to publishing. Jessica is not pleased that Grady has essentially gone behind her back to publish her book. She is even less pleased to learn that she has been booked on national talk shows. When she travels to New York, Jessica is presented as a neophyte who is insulted and deliberately misunderstood by her media interviewers. But later, she goes to a weekend party at a country house, a murder takes place, and Jessica solves it. Jessica not only has a new career of writing mystery novels but the new career has also come with a new hobby of solving murders.

By the third episode of the series, Jessica has written and published six best sellers ("Birds of a Feather"). She must often tell her friends that she needs to work on a recalcitrant draft or must make revisions, having just received her editor's notes. Her grief project has become a full-blown career.

Murder, She Wrote could have avoided feminist issues entirely, since the protagonist is a retired teacher well beyond child-bearing years who is widowed without children, in a small town in Maine. But feminist issues and questions are often portrayed.

Those who favor describing the portrayal of feminism in the series as postfeminist can claim that Jessica has to deal with sexism. In "Murder, She Spoke," she tries to assist a police detective who immediately dismisses her as a useless woman. When he learns that she writes mysteries, he tells her he approves of "writing [as] a real good hobby for a woman. You can cook up some supper. You can chat on the phone. Then pop over to the old typewriter now and then for a few minutes." Jessica attempts to put him in his place for his outmoded attitude by remarking, "Yes. When I'm not too busy beating the laundry against the rocks in the river." Her efforts are in vain. He tells her clearly that murder is not "charming" and detective work is "man's work," although he admits that "Sometimes the ladies have real good hunches" (15:55). He finally tells her to stay away from all aspects of the case: "I really, really don't wanna see you coming around here anymore … unless you're with some man here to arrange bail for Greg Dalton" [ellipsis in transcript]. Jessica points out that women could also arrange bail and tells him that his refusal to examine all of the evidence is foolish [ellipsis in transcript]. At the end of the episode, he acknowledges the value of her help and tells her that he will never again "underestimate the power of women's intuition." Jessica and the viewer are both gobsmacked.

Although we see a number of such representations of blatant sexism, and also see Jessica taking offense and attempting to straighten out the perpetrators (with varying success), feminism is never suggested as a solution to the problem, or even a part of the solution. In fact, Jessica rejects feminism. When an interviewer remarks that "I, for one, Mrs. Fletcher, was delighted by the feminist thrust … you were able to weave into your story line [ellipsis in transcript]," Jessica is quick to reply, "That really wasn't my intention" ("The Murder of Sherlock Holmes"). She insists on being called "Mrs.," not "Ms." ("The Bottom Line Is Murder"). Given the way that the series represents feminists, such rejection is hardly surprising. Although Jessica takes offense at the sexist (and ageist) attitudes of the police detectives she encounters and is supportive of her friends, she never expresses explicitly feminist views in support of other women. Indeed, Jessica distances herself from feminism. While she supports individual women, she is not going to take on the patriarchy.

In *Murder, She Wrote*, women who express explicitly feminist views are shown as angry, and hysterical. In "The Bottom Line Is Murder," where the murder takes place in a television station, one of the assistant producers, Lynette Bryant, is depicted as an angry feminist. Her anger is explained by another member of the staff: "She's a very talented girl who wasn't given much to do under Steve's [the producer's] wing" (32:17). When television show host Kenneth Chambers is murdered and producer Steve Honig is put in jail under suspicion of murder, Lynnette sees an opportunity. She tells Clare Henley, a young television reporter and Chambers' mistress, that Chambers deserves no mourning, and Steve isn't much better: "Kenneth Chambers only cared about himself. He and Steve were a couple of self-centered chauvinists. And with them out of the way, now is our big chance." Lynette thinks that she's justified in her rapid takeover, telling Clare that everything she's doing is for her benefit. She insists that Clare, after a thorough makeover, will become a "star." However, the feminist Lynette's idea of stardom requires that Clare presents herself as a sex object, contrary to Clare's own wishes (21:50). Lynette is only interested in feminism as it pertains to her; she insists that Jessica call her Ms. Bryant but dismisses Jessica's request to be called Mrs. Fletcher: "Whatever" (24:35).

Back in Cabot Cove, a self-described feminist named Phyllis rather nastily remarks to another woman on the subject of alimony, "Unlike you, Eve, who soaked your husband for all he was worth." When Eve suggests that, as a feminist, Phyllis doesn't "believe in alimony," Phyllis replies, "Oh, I believe in alimony. I just believe in sisterhood more" ("If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly" 3:18), although her attitude doesn't seem consistent with sisterhood. Later in the episode, Phyllis, a widow, thanks Jessica for being a role model for her own widowhood: "You were such an inspiration to me when Barry died …. Seeing how you stood on your own two feet after your husband passed away … helped me to make the decision to keep our travel agency and run it myself" (21:02). Jessica seems startled to learn that she has inspired a feminist.

Jessica is also the only completely positive woman character in the series. But her closest friends are male, even though supposed lifelong female friends keep cropping up. In the first three seasons of *Murder, She Wrote*, Jessica has no female friends in Cabot Cove who are recurring characters. Her closest friends are Seth Hazlett and Sheriff Amos Tupper. While Seth seems a competent physician and good friend, the sheriff isn't very bright, and the murders in Cabot Cove are completely beyond him. The only women residents of Cabot Cove in these seasons are represented by bit parts and murder victims.

Finally, in the fourth season, some women residents of Cabot Cove are featured regularly: a real estate agent (Eve), a beauty salon owner (Loretta), a divorced housewife (Ideal), and a manicurist (Corinne). They congregate at Loretta's beauty salon to gossip. Eve seems to have taken on the feminist role, as travel agent Phyllis is no longer featured. Despite her claims to feminism, Eve is frankly man-hungry and unsupportive of her woman friends. The conversations at Loretta's tend toward *double entendre*. For example, when the women are buying lottery tickets in the episode "If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly," Ideal remarks, "I feel like I'm going to get lucky today." Eve responds, "Oh, Ideal, you haven't gotten lucky since your husband left you" (3:10). Then, the wife of the night deputy is murdered, and Jessica and the sheriff learn that he has been having simultaneous affairs with nearly all of the salon regulars and employees. The women are humiliated when they learn of the existence of the other affairs. Loretta, the salon owner, is also humiliated, even though she had not been having an affair with the deputy. She must admit to having collagen treatments as her alibi for the time of the murder: "Well, at my age, in this work, with no husband, I, uh, just can't get old. Please. Please don't tell anyone" (40:30). Unlike Jessica, these women are characterized by their loneliness and weakness. Jessica, on the other hand, is strong and independent.

In "A Body to Die For," when a new gym opens in town, every woman in town except Jessica joins, attracted by the promise of improved fitness and a perfect body, as well as by the flirtatious owner Wayne Bennett. While we see all of these women fawning over Wayne, we never see one of his best customers, Adele Metzger, Sheriff Mort Metzger's wife. When Wayne praises her "commitment," Sheriff Metzger remarks that her commitment is reflected in Wayne's bill (24:50), but he doesn't seem nearly as upset by Adele's attendance at the gym as the other husbands. We are told that Adele is an ex-Marine and physically quite strong. At the end of the episode, Sheriff Metzger signs up for a bodybuilding class because, after training with Wayne, Adele starts winning ten out of ten times in their evening arm wrestling matches (46:44). Adele is clearly presented as another ridiculous woman, but her ridiculousness is in her seeming masculinity. Although her physical strength and previous career seem to indicate that Adele is not a traditional woman, she is in a traditional marriage and is not working outside the home. She also moved with her husband from New York City to a very small town in Maine.

In the same episode, Eve Simpson meets a new client, Fred, a seemingly wealthy man interested in a property that she is trying to sell. She is pleased

that she sells the property and receives a check for a down payment, but even more pleased with her attractive client: "He's a man of impeccable taste, who knows just what he wants …. We're talking charm. We're talking single. We're talking gentleman farmer with a capital G" (6:52). Eve's wealthy client turns out to be a con man, as well as a former colleague and mentor of Wayne's. He tries to ensnare Eve in his con, and, worse, asks her for a list of clients (11:50). Wayne has reformed, and is trying to run a legitimate business, but Fred has other ideas. Fred wants in on what he assumes is a new con of Wayne's, but Wayne wants nothing to do with Fred's real estate scam (13:49). Fred is murdered, and once again, Jessica must solve the crime. In the process, she discovers that Wayne is secretly married, which displeases many of his clients; he kept his marriage a secret because he knew that his flirtatious behavior was an important part of the appeal of his gym.

When the mayor runs for re-election in the episode "Town Father," Eve Simpson says that it's high time that the town elected a female mayor (8:59), a statement that everyone finds ridiculous – and find even more ridiculous when Eve runs (22:25). Of course, she never has a chance. In the same episode, two male members of the city council try to talk Jessica into running. Jessica claims to be too tired from her writing (20:09). While the suggestion that Jessica run might indicate that the men of Cabot Cove are not really sexist (they just object to Eve Simpson), it merely underscores that Jessica is really one of the boys, not one of the girls. Even the women at the beauty shop, who claim to be Eve's friends, say behind her back that they will not vote for her (22:33).

Although postfeminists of the 1980s agreed that women had a right to education and work, that is not what we see in *Murder, She Wrote*. Throughout the series, working women are shown to have difficulties in "having it all." These situations are not always presented sympathetically, and the conclusions of these episodes tend toward a recommendation for a return to patriarchy, where women did not work outside the home after they were married.

Faludi uses a *Murder, She Wrote* episode ("Just Another Fish Story") in *Backlash*:

> While TV generally presented single women's stampede to the altar as their 'choice,' the story lines sometimes revealed their underlying agenda—to serve as wish fulfillment for single men. The show 'Murder, She Wrote' … offered one such transparent tale in a 1988 episode about the marital redemption of a single professional woman. Jilted by a female careerist, boyfriend Grady takes to the bar. Well, maybe it's for the best, he decides. 'I want a traditional girl.' A fellow drinker pipes up. 'Is she a career woman?' When Grady nods, the guy gives him a knowing look: 'Yeah, you give 'em a briefcase and they take your pants.' By the end of the episode, the career woman (an accountant) recants and comes rushing to Grady for absolution. 'I don't want to be an accountant,' she cries. 'I just want to be your wife.' A pleased Grady concludes, 'I think everything's gonna work out just fine.'
>
> (Faludi, p. 158)

Faludi's interpretation might be a bit hard on Grady but isn't inaccurate.

Both Grady and his fiancée Donna are accountants. Donna is a very gifted accountant, who is currently working for her father. She finds the accounting evidence that enables Jessica to solve the murder. Grady adores her, telling Jessica that she is brilliant at accounting, much more capable than he. Later in the episode, Donna confesses to Jessica that she really hates accounting and would much rather be a full-time wife and mother. However, Grady has been so supportive of her career that she has become convinced that they aren't really compatible (29:11). She breaks off the engagement, leaving Grady to drown his sorrows, while admitting that "I want a wife who will be a wife … and will stay at home and raise the kids, have dinner on the table. I mean, what's wrong with wanting things to be a little old-fashioned?" Even Grady is appalled at what he's just said: "Boy, I hate it when I say stuff like that …. I'd never stand in her way. I wouldn't wanna hold her back" (36:12). Donna does come to Grady and admits that she doesn't "want to be an accountant. I wanna be a wife. I wanna be your wife" (46:35). While no viewer would want Donna to endure work she hates, it seems wrong that the accounting career should be awarded to an apparent mediocrity like Grady (the only initiative he shows in any episode is getting Jessica's novel published in the pilot).

An earlier example occurs in the episode "Birds of a Feather." Jessica's niece Victoria and her fiancé Howard met in New York, but now live in San Francisco. In New York, Howard was a struggling actor and cabdriver, but he gave up acting to come to San Francisco to marry Victoria and sell insurance. Or so Victoria thought, until she tried to reach him at work and learned that he had been fired. She finds matches from a nightclub in his apartment and becomes convinced that he is having an affair (5:57). She and Jessica go to the nightclub to see what is going on. While they are there, a murder is committed, and Howard, who is performing as a drag queen, is arrested. Howard explains to Jessica that he took the job because he was desperate for any acting job: "It was only supposed to be for two weeks. I was gonna quit before Victoria got out here. Mr. Drake said I was the world's worst female impersonator, but the customers liked me 'cause I was klutzy and I made 'em laugh. He wouldn't let me quit. He knew I was broke, so he held back on my wages" (21:50). Lest we think that the series is being subversive by depicting a drag club, we must remember that Howard, who is straight, is a terrible drag queen (as shown by the short scene where we see him performing). And the title of the episode ("Birds of a Feather") is a play on words, referring to a series of French films called *La Cage aux Folles* set in an around a drag club called The Birdcage (the American adaptation was named *The Birdcage*). Harvey Fierstein created a stage musical of *La Cage aux Folles*, which was noteworthy for portraying a gay couple in leading roles, a first for musical comedy. This episode of *Murder, She Wrote* doesn't feature any gay characters.

Victoria doesn't actually care if Howard is unemployed while he looks for acting work and says so repeatedly. She has a successful career in advertising. Howard, however, refuses to marry her unless he is gainfully employed. We

are apparently supposed to respect him for his adherence to these patriarchal values. Once the murderer is found, he finds a new job as a real estate agent. However, at the last minute, Howard's agent comes through with a two-day-a-week acting job on a soap opera (47:11).

When Victoria and Howard return to New York in "Corned Beef and Carnage," Victoria works as an account executive in a large advertising firm. Howard expresses doubt about her employer to Jessica: "that Larry Kinkaid–he uses people. He burns them up, and then he throws them away. For all I know, one of these days, he's going to ask Victoria to put her body on the line for a client." But he is also concerned that "I feel like she's slipping away from me. I mean, it was just me, I could go on with-with nothing. But she's got a real shot, and I could never stand in the way of her career" (8:02). When Victoria expresses concern about Howard, Jessica asks her if perhaps the problem is Victoria's job. Victoria admits that she has her doubts about "this rat race. There's so much pressure, cutthroat competition, and some of it seems really shallow." She assures Jessica that she is only working so that Howard can pursue his dream (20:25). Her being the primary breadwinner seems like a nice inversion of stereotypical gender roles, especially with Howard's support of Victoria's career. But Howard's worst fears turn out to be true when Victoria's boss tells her he expects her to sleep with a client in order to retain an account. Victoria quits on the spot but realizes that her decision is not practical when she learns that Howard has been turned down for another acting job. She returns to the office and discovers Kincaid's body. Jessica solves the murder. Without Larry Kincaid, Victoria's workplace becomes less stressful.

It would seem that the crisis has been averted. However, Victoria was victimized by Kincaid because she was a woman who needed her job. While everyone finds Kincaid's behavior despicable, the attitude of the other characters seems more resigned than outraged, especially when another woman account executive from a different firm is shown using her sex appeal to make deals, giving the impression that she would have no problem sleeping with someone to get what she wanted.

A different example of the tension between career and relationship occurs in "Sing a Song of Murder," where Jessica goes to help her cousin Emma, a music hall performer and a part-owner of the venue. Her romantic interest, Oliver Trumbull, gave up a promising career as a Shakespearian actor in order to stay with Emma. He now performs as the comedian for the music hall, much to the distress of his daughter. Emma's life is threatened when she refuses to sell the music hall to someone who wants to turn it into a rock concert venue. Oliver suggests that he and Emma retire together: "you've given them 40 years. It's about time you thought about yourself and me." Emma says no, because "I don't want to turn two dear friends into a couple of snarling alley cats. I mean, this is our life, not some cottage in Dorchester tending roses" (9:47). Emma's refusal should come as no surprise to anyone paying attention to her performance at the music hall. Emma's signature song is about a sparrow who refuses to share a gilded cage with a little yellow bird she dearly loves,

because she "love[s] my freedom, too" (4:27). Emma is permitted to continue in her own way, performing till the end with Oliver at her side. However, as several characters point out, the audiences for music hall programs are dwindling, and her retirement will probably be forced in the near future. Emma may be happy at the moment, but her decision is not wise.

Still another example of a woman who believes she must choose between career and romance occurs in "The Bottom Line is Murder," where Jessica visits an old friend, Jayne Honig, who gave up her very successful psychiatric practice to have a family: "I wanted- still want- a baby." Jessica points out that "[A career] doesn't necessarily preclude the other." Jayne replies, "Then let's just say marriage is more of a full-time job than I thought. I know Steve is under a lot of pressure from the show, but, Jess, I feel … he's drifting away. So I thought if I could be there for him, all the time- [ellipsis in transcript]" (14:48). While Steve's job producing a consumer advocate program hosted by a temperamental star who takes bribes is certainly stressful, he also doesn't seem to be very good at it. He does not support his staff, and it is remarkably easy for Lynette to assume his position when he is arrested. Like Donna and Grady, a highly competent woman gives up her career to take care of a much less competent man.

Jessica herself is not immune to the supposed conflict between work and personal life. The two-part episode, "Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall," portrays a foil for Jessica, another mystery novelist, Eudora McVeigh, the "undisputed premier female mystery novelist" in the world. However, Eudora has been doing poor work as of late, so poor that her publisher suggests she take a year off. Her publisher also decided to sign Jessica to replace Eudora in his lineup (5:10). Rather than blame her publisher, her agent, or even her husband, Eudora blames Jessica (17:17).

Meanwhile, back in Cabot Cove, we see Jessica engrossed in her work and experiencing pressure from her friend Seth to spend more time socializing with him. As they return from a day-long fishing expedition, Seth remarks that "the day was not exactly a total loss. At least we made you laugh. And if I'm not mistaken, you have a bit of color in your face." Jessica asks what he meant about the comment about her face, and he replies, "it hasn't seen the light of day for about-What? Six weeks …. You have been working on your book. You're always working on a book, Jessica. I wonder sometimes how you can tell them apart" (11:26). Jessica follows up on this conversation, admitting that she appreciates Seth's keeping her "on an even keel," but asks him what he meant. Seth cites examples of times he has invited her on fishing and hiking expeditions, but she said no because she had too much work to do. When Jessica asks him point-blank if he thinks she's overworking, he says that work is "all you seem to have time for these days …. Now, a few years back, you needed this writing to help you get through the empty days and lonely nights. I know that. I went through it myself …. I just think maybe you ought to get off the treadmill while you still have a chance" (13:29). Since they've just finished a day of fishing, and later plan to have dinner together, it's not clear

whether Seth is being selfish or Jessica is actually overworking. Seth apparently had no problem with Jessica's writing before it became a very successful career.

Eudora comes to visit Jessica in Cabot Cove with an ulterior motive: to steal the notes from Jessica's current manuscript in order to pass Jessica's ideas off as her own. Jessica is shocked, not only at the violation, but that Eudora, of all people, would feel the need to do such a thing. Eudora tells her about her dry spell, and asks, "Did you ever sit at the typewriter, staring at a sea of white paper, straining for words that never come?" Jessica says that all writers have had that experience, but Eudora says that she's been going through it for years (15:50). But then a private investigator is murdered, and Seth is poisoned by an apple that was in a basket Eudora brought Jessica. Eudora is charged with the murder of the investigator and of the attempted murder of Seth. Jessica finds the real killer, and both women experience an epiphany of sorts. Eudora decides to take a break from writing and visit her sister in Oregon, who "has three adorable children …. So for a few months I'll be Aunt Eudora, and see if I can put some sanity back into my life" (45:27).

Jessica tries to get back to work on her book, but the day before Seth had issued her a fishing invitation. Jessica is surprised that he was so eager to go fishing so soon after being released from the hospital. He replied, "And I almost didn't [get released]. Had lots of time to think about … tasting the wine and smelling the roses [ellipsis in transcript]." Jessica had begged off because of her work (43:28). But after all she (and Eudora) has experienced, she changes her mind, well after the last minute. She changes into fishing gear and runs down to the dock, where Seth and Caleb have been waiting for an hour because Seth was fairly certain she would come (46:51).

This episode pits two women mystery writers against each other. Both are successful and both have worked hard for that success. Both, however, are being pressured by men in their personal lives. Eudora is being pressured by her husband Hank, and Jessica is being pressured by Seth. Eudora's publisher is also putting pressure on both of them, by trying to get Eudora to retire and trying to get Jessica to sign a contract. Would a male author in *Murder, She Wrote* be placed under similar pressure, and, if he were, would he have gone off to Oregon or gone fishing? Once again, a woman's career is shown as disposable, even if only temporarily.

Murder, She Wrote remains an entertaining, high-quality series, suitable for bingeing or sampling. It still remains popular on streaming services, and nearly thirty years after its final season ended, allusions to it are easily recognized, so much so that they have at times supplanted reality. In a recent edition of the *Washington Post*, a photograph of Angela Lansbury celebrating the series' 100th episode illustrated an article about which states are most likely to produce artists (Maine is number one for writers) (Van Dam). The fact that the newspaper chose to use a photograph of an actress who portrayed a well-known fictional writer to illustrate the article says a good deal about how the series has endured, especially when actual Maine novelists like Stephen King exist. However, the viewer should be aware that women's rights in the 1980s

were still being debated, even as they are now. The depiction of women's issues and of women themselves in the series is not only antifeminist but it is also in some ways misogynist, even as the series continues to entertain. The depiction of women, their work, and their freedom to marry in the series is not portrayed to show women's freedom; they are portrayed to support the backlash against feminism. Sadly, the entertainment value only makes it more effective.

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5 "This Woman Has a Brilliant Criminal Mind"

Information Behavior of a Widow Woman from Maine

Michelle M. Kazmer

The development of Jessica Fletcher as a female amateur detective in the tradition of Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple has been widely asserted in scholarly and popular literature (e.g., Irons, 1995, p. xi). When Fletcher describes herself in the series pilot as "a widow woman from Maine," she echoes Miss Marple's introduction of herself as "living alone, as I do, in a rather out-of-the-way part of the world" (Christie, 1930). Scholars have produced a strong corpus of work examining Jessica Fletcher and Jane Marple vis-a-vis each other as older, single, female, rural, amateur detectives.

Bailey (2017) draws a timeline of female protagonists in crime fiction from Andrew Forrester's creation of Mrs. Gladden in 1864 through Jane Marple's debut in 1927, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone who appeared in 1982, Jessica Fletcher's appearance in 1984, and beyond. Bailey's timeline situates these female sleuths in their social, political, and economic contexts, demonstrating how the evolution from Marple to Fletcher mirrors societal changes from the 1920s to the 1980s. Gates (2010) groups Marple and Fletcher together as old and thus both non-sexual and non-threatening (p. 4, 92) and draws out the important distinction between spinster and widow (p. 4; Lathen does the same) that is intrinsic to differences in information access explored in this chapter. Simultaneously, Gates situates Fletcher in the explosion of popularity of female detectives in the 1980s–2000s and the shift to formalized criminalism away from homespun intuitive problem-solving. Lathen, in a more popular-culture essay, links Jessica Fletcher to Miss Marple as a "successor" (1986, p. 340), and focuses on one of Fletcher's and Marple's shared information behaviors: asking direct questions.

My analysis of Jessica Fletcher takes a perspective drawn from information behavior studies – because detection is surely an information behavior – to reveal an underexplored aspect of Fletcher's approach to mystery solving (Gainor, 2011). I have argued (Kazmer, 2016) that those who write about Miss Marple often do not acknowledge her full worth (even when they are writing about her as underestimated), and the same is true of Jessica Fletcher. Such analyses often fall into the trap of believing what each character has *said*, rather than paying attention to what she *did*, no matter how many times we are warned in the stories to avoid this trap. Neither Marple nor Fletcher sits

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quietly at home, solving mysteries using a hyper-feminized awareness of social types and interpersonal niceties. On the contrary, they are both physically vigorous in going after solutions to mysteries and use forensically tangible clues, keen sensory observation, and rigorous logic techniques to root out evil. Each woman uses complex and sophisticated tools and tactics to manipulate information value and shape her relationships with those around her to facilitate information exchange and eventually allow her to elucidate the solution to a mystery.

Using information worlds theory, I have analyzed Jessica Fletcher's information behavior. The result is a view of Jessica Fletcher that sits in dialogue with how she has been examined from other disciplinary stances and highlights some similarities and differences between Marple and Fletcher in how they seek information, use logic to process information, and strategically manipulate the information worlds around them to achieve justice. The significance of adding an information behavior theoretic analysis to the variety of fruitful lenses through which to view *Murder, She Wrote* is primarily that it helps us understand the enduring popularity of the series (Riggs, 1996). While it is not often thought of in this way, information behavior in the fictional world must bear verisimilitude to how we experience information behavior in real life, or the context and flow of the story will not be believable. While we regularly discuss this presence or absence of verisimilitude about other kinds of activities in fiction – "pfft; no one would ever say/wear/eat/read/do *that*" – we have rarely foregrounded information behavior in a theoretically motivated way. This chapter contributes to that ongoing dialogue. My analysis focused on 12 episodes, one from each of the 12 seasons of the show, which parallel the 12 Miss Marple novels, conceptually rendered in Table 5.1.

I apply an information behavior theoretic perspective to ask: How does Jessica Fletcher look when viewed through an information behavior theoretic lens, foregrounding an analysis of Fletcher while holding her behaviors in dialogue with those of progenitor Marple? When we think about information behavior, we may imagine specific things: internet searching, perusing library books, looking up government files, paging through old newspapers. But Jessica Fletcher rarely uses standard or formal information sources, and we rarely see her in the library, even after she begins teaching at Manhattan University, although she occasionally visits a newspaper morgue. Instead, she strategically manipulates the world around her in intentional ways to control access to information and to gain access to secrets. Fletcher uses logic to process information and adheres to the detective fiction rule of fair play. And, like Marple, Fletcher uses her social position and people's assumptions about her to accomplish these strategies and logical processes.

Information behavior is a sub-area of information science formally named in 1981, comprising thousands of published empirical and theoretical studies. It includes all aspects of how people behave with respect to information – e.g., seeking, evaluating, storing, avoiding, etc. Good introductions are Nigel Ford's *Introduction to Information Behaviour* (2015) and Given, Case, and Willson's

Table 5.1 The twelve Miss Marple novels each related to one episode from each season of Murder, She Wrote

Christie/Marple novel	*Is linked via:*	Murder, She Wrote *episode*
The Murder at the Vicarage (1930)	A church, a false arrest, a case of unknown parentage	Double Jeopardy (9–12)
The Body in the Library (1942)	Found a body in an unexpected place	A Body to Die For (7–6)
The Moving Finger (1942)	Anonymous letters	Love and Hate in Cabot Cove (10–8)
A Murder is Announced (1950)	Elderly ladies living together	Mr. Penroy's Vacation (5–3)
They Do It with Mirrors, or *Murder with Mirrors* (1952)	Young man with mental illness who may be a killer	A Fashionable Way to Die (4–1)
A Pocket Full of Rye (1953)	Profoundly evil charming man outed but not arrested	Trial by Error (2–13)
4.50 from Paddington, or *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw!* (1957)	Jessica is aided in her investigation by an independent young woman	Death in Hawaii (11–4)
The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side, or *The Mirror Crack'd* (1962)	Aging actress	Broadway Malady (1–11)
A Caribbean Mystery (1964)	Serial killer, perhaps …?	Home Care (12–5)
At Bertram's Hotel (1965)	A shooting, a car, a club that's not quite what it seems ….	The Committee (8–9)
Nemesis (1971)	Murder in the past not committed by the person convicted	The Days Dwindle Down (3–21)
Sleeping Murder ([1976])	Murder in the past, young man sent to an asylum, jealousy	Shear Madness (6–20)

Looking for Information (2023). In the flavor of information science I practice, I examine individuals' information behaviors and their shared knowledge practices and how those are shaped by the worlds around them. For this analysis of Jessica Fletcher's information behavior, I am using the theoretical approach afforded by information worlds theory. In creating it, Gary Burnett and Paul Jaeger (2008) drew on two conceptual frameworks: Elfreda Chatman's small world, where information behaviors occur within local, largely homogeneous social settings (1991, 1999), and Jurgen Habermas's lifeworld, the sum total of all information resources and norms that exist culture-wide (1984). Burnett and Jaeger sought to resolve this big/small dichotomy to examine information behavior within individual worlds and interactions across multiple worlds.

Their resulting information worlds theory includes four concepts: social norms, social types, information value, and information behavior. Social norms are the shared understanding of rightness or wrongness in observable social behaviors; social types are the shared perceptions of individuals' roles

in the context of the information world; information value is the shared understanding of what is worth attention and what information is meaningful; and information behavior is the full range of normative behaviors related to information. Information worlds have boundaries; boundaries are not exclusionary/inclusionary barriers, but drawing on boundary object theory (Star & Griesemer, 1989), they are porous interfaces between worlds, lines at which worlds come into contact with each other to facilitate mutual understanding and allow coordinated action.

The first aspect of this analysis comes from outside the fictional world. The writers intentionally shaped the information worlds in which the main characters would live and solve mysteries in ways that are extrinsic to the story. Cabot Cove, Maine, represents a small world much as St. Mary Mead does: the characters have long relationships and a shared history; there is high homogeneity among the people in the town; and the town has an intentionally small population. As a result of making the information world small, Cabot Cove has subsequently become known as a very dangerous place to live. In the same way that information *saturates* a small world, murder does also. One cannot have too many murders take place in the same small town, not only because it would decimate the population, but because information would rapidly start to be disseminated and used differently and in ways that would not feel real to the audience. The information value of everyday information sharing would change, and attention to information would turn into hypervigilance and eventually paranoia.

The setting of Cabot Cove, Maine, also uses specific U.S. regional stereotypes to manipulate the information worlds in which Jessica Fletcher is operating. Placing her in Maine is strategic for several reasons. First, the weather there in the winter is harsh, so it is completely plausible that Jessica would travel for much of the year to nice climates – and these nice climates and new settings are new information worlds, with different information sources, values, and patterns. Second, behavioral stereotypes of State-of-Mainers are relevant to Fletcher's information behaviors. She is independent, providing a basis for willingness to use information differently from everyone else. She is straightforward, demonstrating a willingness to talk about hard subjects and ask very direct questions, both of which allow her to elicit hard-to-get information from a variety of sources.

Social norms go beyond her regional stereotypes and directly affect Fletcher's ability to seek information. First, in the US, the fact that Fletcher did not drive was noticeable but not implausible. It was noticeable because Fletcher – based on her age in the show – belonged to a generation of women of whom many both learned to drive and then regularly drove. Some did not, though, and her inability to drive and unwillingness to learn puts her in a noticeably eccentric but not unbelievable group. Her need to use public transportation, her bicycle, or be driven by other people consistently increased her ability to encounter information. As she traveled by bicycle, taxicabs, police cars, and cars with strangers in the pursuit of information, it was surprising how

infrequently she encountered serious problems such as kidnapping or other personal violence. Much more common were technological or social problems. For example, in "Truck Stop" (S5E16), Fletcher and her colleague have a car breakdown, a technological problem, and get stranded at the titular truck stop. In "The Committee" (S8E9), Fletcher gets a ride from a character but then has to be terribly obvious and rude to him socially – not because of any unreasonable behavior of his toward her at that time, but only because she needed to get rid of him.

Second, Fletcher's status as a widow makes her knowledgeable about a variety of topics – not only sexual – that often remain unspoken. Because she has had what is perceived to be the actualized life of a married woman, people do not try to give her superfluous information about romantic or sexual relationships, as would typically happen with a single woman. Simultaneously, her widow status means people do not overtly try to withhold information about unsavory (again, not only sexual) things to protect her imagined innocence. Her widowhood has left a bubble of respectability around her, as well; it means her status as single at her age is socially acceptable rather than being a symbol of her intrinsic unworthiness. Only occasionally does her status as a woman outweigh her status as a widow and hinder the flow of information. An example occurs in "A Fashionable Way to Die" (S4E1) when the Inspector is handed a picture. He has just invited Jessica to the Italian Riviera for the weekend, with an obviously romantic overtone, when his assistant finds a fragment of a photograph in the victim's pocket. The inspector elaborately refuses to show it to Jessica, who assures him that he need not be overscrupulous as she is not a suspect in the crime. He in turn assures her that he is shielding her from this information not because he is an inspector and it is evidence, but because he is a gentleman and the content of the picture is indelicate. Her widow status has thus made her perceived to be eligible for a romantic encounter, while her gender has limited her access to the facts of the case.

Third, Fletcher is independently wealthy because she is a very successful author. Wealth in itself affords privileged access to information in many settings and also offers her the power to construct and reshape the world around her (Franks & Brien, 2015). This is not uniformly true, though, and occasionally, Fletcher chooses to downplay her wealth in order to access information in other settings, such as in the frequently-memed barfly scene in "Weave a Tangled Web" (S5E10). In this scene, Fletcher takes on the clothing, makeup, walk, and speech patterns that were considered stereotypical of a tipsy woman who knows her way around a dive bar, and uses that assumed role to glean information from other bar patrons.

Fletcher's lack of a driving license for short errands and trips shaped her information behavior, and that was true not only in Cabot Cove; it affected her local travel within other locations. Jessica Fletcher as a denizen of the small world of Cabot Cove, Maine, is intrinsic to her character so that the Cabot Cove episodes exploit the way her close and overlapping social networks in

that small town shape her access to information. However, Fletcher also travels broadly, both because she can afford it and often because her work as an author requires it. In each of the destinations she visits, the social, cultural, and political norms of the place shape her ability to seek information from the people around her. Fortunately, and finally, Fletcher's social role as an older well-off widow allows her to ask questions freely as she engages in this information seeking in any setting. Much as Miss Marple frequently points out explicitly that her age, gender, and social role leave her able to ask questions – that she is in fact expected to do so – Jessica Fletcher is able to pry information from unlikely sources with a penetrating gaze and direct query.

And, in fact, it is good that Fletcher is exceedingly skilled at eliciting information from people, as she shares another information behavior with Jane Marple from decades earlier: a consistent non-reliance on standard or formal information sources (Whitt, 1998). A rare exception that tests the rule appears in the episode "Double Jeopardy" (S9E12) in which she notes her "favorite reference book" during class and the library figures into the plot of the story. She occasionally uses the newspaper as a source, directly by visiting a newspaper office archive or encountering a current print newspaper, or indirectly as in "Shear Madness" (SE6E20) where references to stories published in the past help guide Fletcher to the solution.

However, formal sources of information that are generally available to the public – libraries, reference books, newspapers – rapidly fade into the background as Fletcher instead makes use of bureaucratic documents. This echoes Miss Marple's use of bureaucratic documents such as wills and marriage certificates, but Fletcher's access to and use of these documents is substantially more frequent. This is particularly so after Sheriff Mort Metzger brings big city crime-fighting to Cabot Cove starting with "Mr. Penroy's Vacation" (S5E3). Metzger's sheriff's office creates written reports, receives medical documents, and eventually starts receiving various law-enforcement documents via fax machine. As a result, after Metzger's arrival, Fletcher pivots to experiencing bureaucratic documents in general, and police documents in particular, as both information sources and as boundary objects. As information sources, these documents – coroners' reports, lab reports, rap sheets, exhumation reports, ballistic reports – operate in two ways. First, they straightforwardly offer the direct and explicit information contained in the documents themselves, information such as time and cause of death, presence of a substance in a body, existence and date of a marriage. Second, they allow Fletcher to engage in logical reasoning based on information associated with the document itself: who created it, and when, and for what purpose; where it is, and when, and why; and who has or had access to it. As boundary objects, they offer "interpretive flexibility" (Star, 2010, p. 602), where the same document can be used to support reasoning toward different outcomes based on use and interpretation by different people, and they allow people to operate in a shared context in the absence of consensus (Star, 2010, p. 604). The same marriage license, exhumation report, or ballistics report allows Fletcher and law enforcement to

work on the same problem even if they do not agree on the interpretation of the document, how their work should be done, or the desired outcome.

Fletcher cannot consistently rely on bureaucratic documents; while she can often access them, access is not guaranteed given her status as a civilian, even one as structurally privileged as she. And, frankly, one reason she rarely relies on formal information sources is that an individual spending hours looking in books and stacks of reports does not make an engaging viewing experience for the television audience. So, Fletcher, who needs to entertain the viewing audience much like the original Marple had to entertain the reader, interacts instead with people. People are how Fletcher is drawn in to the mysteries she solves, and also how she gains access to the information worlds she needs to achieve those solutions. It is often an old friend who draws her in, playing on nostalgic or long-standing relationships, but sometimes it is a stranger: In "The Days Dwindle Down" (S3E21), Fletcher finds herself in California being pitched by a stranger to help solve a mystery. She gently tries to argue out of helping; as she has already stated by this point of the episode, "it's too nice to work here." However, Fletcher, very much like Marple before her, feels obligated to help when a crime has been committed. While Marple usually said she was obligated by her skills and experience, Fletcher generally says that she feels obligated to help specifically because her celebrity and wealth give her privilege that others do not have. For Fletcher, this sense evolves over the course of the series as her fame as an author develops (Brunsdale, 2010a). In "Broadway Malady" (S1E13), Fletcher is still able to meet people who do not immediately recognize her face or her name, which allows her to elicit information very differently than she is able to do later in the series where such anonymity is rarely afforded her. In fact, the series plays with this over time, having her encounter both situations where she should be recognized but is not, and situations where she makes every effort not to be recognized but is.

Privilege, fame, and recognition aside, Fletcher is often able to take advantage of the old adage that people will always talk to an old lady, but often will refuse to talk to law enforcement officers … or any outsiders such as out-of-towners, attorneys, or prospective investors. As the sisters say to Fletcher in "Mr. Penroy's Vacation": "Jessica, we've known you for years, but Mr. Metzger is practically a stranger." Separately, Sheriff Metzger says to Fletcher: "Small town like this, shouldn't take long to get to the bottom of things." These quotes reveal – to the audience, and intentionally so – a mutual but unknown disagreement about the flow of information and accessibility of truth in a small world. In the same episode, the one thing about information flow that everyone seems to agree on is that the sheriff should seek information from Jessica Fletcher, and they each tell him so, separately. This establishes and reveals Fletcher's role as a widely recognized information gatekeeper in the community.

It is relatively easy for Fletcher to maintain her access to information in her hometown of Cabot Cove, where she exerts social and structural privilege over the information networks in that small world. But when she leaves Cabot

Cove, other characteristics (gender, marital status, wealth, fame) help her gain access quickly to information worlds in new settings (Bell, 1992). In addition to personal characteristics, she engages in actions and relies on context to secure such information access (Graffeo, 2006). For example, in "A Fashionable Way to Die" (S4E1), Fletcher is on the scene when the body is found, which helps keep her in this information world. The inspector in that case has read her books, recognizes her name, and allows her to stay. Fletcher has a different kind of fame from Miss Marple in this way. Miss Marple's renown is among law enforcement circles and among her friends specifically as a detective. Fletcher's entrée into the information world of a crime is normally based on her fame as a writer rather than as a detective. However, not everybody is swayed, especially in the earlier seasons, when her fame and wealth are still undeveloped.

The relative ease with which Fletcher enters information worlds highlights how porous they are overall. Because they are porous, not only do people enter and leave them easily, but information does as well. This enables Fletcher to eavesdrop, overhear, and listen in on conversations occurring in information worlds to which she does not truly have full access. She also is indulged in frequent and detailed conversations about open cases with law enforcement. This is similar to Miss Marple who, decades earlier, also engaged in dialogue with law enforcement in which they revealed facts about investigations to her (cf. *A Pocket Full of Rye*, *4.50 From Paddington*). Occasionally, though, we instead see a little bit of Poirot in Fletcher: In "Shear Madness" (S6E20), the sheriff in the Texas town initially does not believe in Fletcher's ability or knowledge. She plays up to these assumptions, which goads him into engaging in a dialogue with her, revealing a lot more than he intends. She approaches her interaction by responding to his clear assertions with a quizzical "I beg your pardon?" and subsequent dithery "Well, I agree, that's certainly the most *obvious* conclusion to draw." As a result, the sheriff is pleased to explain much more about his thoughts to her than he otherwise would have. This interaction reads much more like Poirot, who gets people to disagree with or despise him so he can get information out of them.

Obviously, from a storytelling perspective, these somewhat implausible conversations between an amateur detective and law enforcement officers are a way to get information about the investigation to the audience. Fletcher (and Marple) are in this way serving as boundary objects between the police investigation itself and the audience as a set of people, crossing the fictional boundary. At the same time, they are often serving as boundary objects between the police investigation itself and the set of in-story characters who are involved in the crime, such as family or co-workers.

The use of audial cues and shared hearing to facilitate information flow across boundaries is not restricted to dialogue, and of course is not restricted only to dialogue that directly involves Fletcher. Shared hearing among characters and the audience, or retelling stories to Fletcher, also occurs. For example, in "Mr. Penroy's Vacation" (S5E3), a tiny, repeated audio cue is a character making an exclamation that could have been "Holy!" or "Ole!" or "Oh, Lee!"

Of course, the three possibilities of this audial clue lead to three different suspects. *Murder, She Wrote* thus takes advantage of the medium of television, and it is often true that what we hear is more important than what we see. In "Mr. Penroy's Vacation," the person who is the instigator and recipient of the terrified ejaculation is unseen and unheard. In "Broadway Malady" (S1E13), a primary witness is a man who is blind; his earwitness recounting of a crime is more accurate than the accounts provided by sighted bystanders.

A specific subset of audial information found frequently in *Murder, She Wrote* occurs when people speak truths they are not supposed to know. When a character says, "I didn't shoot him through that open window," or "my father died in your own confessional," or "threw the gun off Santa Monica Pier," or "baggage claim checks," or "blood over everything: floor, refrigerator, even the ceiling," they are offering information indirectly. The listener – or eavesdropper – has to reason with the information in context to coax from it the meaning needed to solve the mystery. Fletcher does so and shares the explanation with other characters and thus the audience.

This boundary-spanning behavior, making sure that information flows among in-story characters and again between the characters and the audience, is not restricted to audial cues and shared hearing. Visual cues and shared seeing are also used, leveraging the affordances of the television medium. Where an inventory of items would require one of Christie's famous lists when presented in a Miss Marple novel, an inventory of items in *Murder, She Wrote* invites the audience to see what Fletcher sees rather than hearing dialogue or a report of a thought. When we watch Jessica count five out of a box meant to hold six floppy disks at the old sugar mill in "Death in Hawaii" (S11E4), we are getting a direct piece of information that we need to reason from to be able to apply correctly. Similarly, the audience sees how Fletcher thinks by relying on Lansbury's facial reactions. The audience is invited to try to share in or duplicate Fletcher's detection by seeing what she sees and seeing how she reacts to it.

As noted earlier in this essay, another important aspect of information behavior in solving (fictional) mysteries is the use of specific tactics to manipulate information value and shape relationships with the goal of facilitating information exchange. Several specific tactics appear in *Murder, She Wrote*. One commonly used across crime fiction is the unquestioned or untrue assumption. These lead to entire paths of information seeking being blocked off, or, conversely, to the audience and detective spending time in blind alleys. For example, in the episode "Double Jeopardy" (S9E12), the audience might assume that the legal concept of double jeopardy was actually relevant to the mystery based on the title. The episode "Home Care" (S12E5) uses this tactic by deploying the untested assumption – by the in-story characters and the audience – that well-spoken and well-dressed plausible young men are speaking the truth while dotty old ladies are often mistaken in their thoughts.

Fletcher begins the series using a tactic that was often deployed by Miss Marple: self-denigrating language. This particularly appears in the pilot, with

occasional occurrences throughout seasons 1 and 2, but the self-denigrating piece clearly did not fit with Lansbury's approach to the character, and it effectively disappears after season 2. Of course, even the self-denigrating language is generally not to be taken at face value; when used, it is still clearly an information elicitation tactic and not an actual self-assessment. This emerges most pointedly in S2E13 "Trial by Error," where Fletcher as a jury foreperson immediately forces the jury to share information and co-create knowledge through discussion by starting deliberations saying, "I just don't understand …." Later in the deliberative process, she cheekily picks up an inadvertent insult earlier uttered by another character to deploy this tactic again, saying "maybe it's my criminal mind that sees this as a complicated puzzle and if so, please bear with me."

This ability to misrepresent herself with the goal of eliciting information goes beyond self-denigrating language to actual acting by Fletcher. The barfly scene in "Weave a Tangled Web" (S5E10), mentioned earlier, is a familiar example, but is far from the only one. Fletcher takes on additional characters in order to gain access to information, and another example is her turn as a wealthy widow in "Widow Weep For Me" (S2E1). The success of this acting technique in "Widow Weep for Me" is particularly nuanced because it is in the sequential unmaskings she experiences at the hands of several other major characters that she gains the most information. In the repeated liminal moments when Marguerite Canfield is revealed to be Jessica Fletcher, information exchange is used to re-solidify social bonds that may have been frayed by her imposture and its discovery.

But not all acting involves taking on another character; Fletcher frequently tweaks her own persona to elicit information. This familiar tactic is used by Jane Marple in *The Body in the Library* (1942) when she speaks with Florence Small, taking on "the accustomed tone of command of somebody whose business it was to give orders," and Fletcher makes use of it frequently. This tactic spans the spectrum from glancing quickly over her glasses to invoke her teacher persona and intimidate her interlocutor, to adjusting her entire presentation-of-self, including posture, hair, make-up, clothing, voice, and speech, to match the social setting (Goffman, 1959). In "Broadway Malady", at the climactic scene, Fletcher is ensconced in Rita Bristol's apartment with Bristol's son Barry. As Fletcher builds to the big reveal based on the empty coffee pot and Barry's prior work with (almost-forgotten) Morley Farmer, she repeatedly invokes maternal hectoring behaviors by asking, "Barry, why are you lying to me?" and "Oh, Barry, why are you being so difficult?" As he reacts to her acting, he becomes upset and eventually violent, admitting: "I can't remember when I didn't want to see her dead." It is not just the dialogue at work here. We tend to think of information elicitation as involving questions or other verbal interrogation techniques, but here Fletcher switches her whole persona from Maine Jessica to New York Jessica, with a red dress, more upright carriage, more formally styled hair, more dramatic makeup, and a more forceful personality. This change echoes Miss Marple when she takes on her Nemesis persona, a change which shows much earlier than the novel of that name.

Miss Marple began taking on a more confident role of Justice as early as, for example, 1931 in the short story "Death by Drowning," and Fletcher shows a similar shift here.

In a specific subset of this constant adjustment of her presentation-of-self, Fletcher also engages in performative womanhood, where gender roles are explicitly deployed in gaining access to information worlds and in eliciting specific information (Butler, 1990). This appears throughout the series and one of the best extended examples is the episode "The Committee" (S8E9), which is predicated on Jessica being the first woman to speak at an all-male club. Her friend Winston and his allies are using Fletcher as the opening woman volley as they storm this bastion of masculinity. She finds herself in an environment predominated by glowering, posturing, threats, and seduction of other men's wives. These are men who engage in manly talk, saying things like "bankers need stockbrokers who need developers who need bankers" while wearing tuxedos, surrounded by portraits of men, and drinking port. Even when they leave the club, the performative masculinity just moves outside, as they trapshoot, sneer, and chomp on food in a menacing manner. Fletcher's performative femininity in the face of this cascade of masculinity allows her to keep out of direct conflicts even when her investigative conclusions are threatening.

Another more straightforward information behavior tactic is that of reasoning from observed facts, a tactic which should be the basis of all fictional crime solving, but often is not. Fletcher's reasoning from observed facts is generally flavored with knowledge of human behavior; this is also true of Marple, but in neither case should this be interpreted as a kind of intuitive problem-solving that evades rigorous thought (Craig & Cadogan, 1981). Both women tend to use evidence-based reasoning while counting on those around them, including the audience or reader, to underestimate their intellectual efforts (Brunsdale, 2010b). For example, in "Death in Hawaii" (S11E4), Fletcher reads a magazine article on the airplane journey to Hawaii and combines that with her observation of an intimate interaction on a videotape to reason out the specific relationship among two characters.

When reasoning from naturally occurring contextual facts is not enough, Fletcher engages in the time-tested behavior of setting a trap to elicit necessary information. Such a trap appears in a scene, reminiscent of two Miss Marple Novels, *The Body in the Library* and *Nemesis*, in the episode "Home Care" (S12E5). Faced with the ominous prospect that Fletcher will reveal key evidence once she is able to get out bed, a shadowy figure shows up, enters Fletcher's room with a flashlight, pulls out a syringe, and is himself dosed with a substance identified as a poison. Terrified and desperate for an antidote, he reveals all ….

Such a revelation serves as an effective capstone summarizing Fletcher's information behaviors. Far from being an armchair detective, Fletcher is physically active in seeking the information needed to solve mysteries. She carefully shapes and re-shapes the information world around her to gain access, manipulating both information value and her interpersonal relationships so that

information flows to her. She uses boundary information objects to facilitate shared understanding between herself and others, and the story and the audience. Rarely relying on formal information sources, Fletcher uses specific behaviors as information elicitation tactics such as self-denigrating language, acting, performing gender, reasoning from observed facts, and trap-setting. The question at the beginning of this chapter asked how Jessica Fletcher looks when viewed through an information theoretic lens, and the answer is that she looks like a strategic, savvy tactician who "couldn't help but notice" the evidence, the facts, and the information she uses to solve the crime.

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6 The Undercover Feminism of Jessica Fletcher in *Murder, She Wrote*

Sharon Dempsey

> *All right* I thought, *why don't we meld Miss Marple and Miss Christie into one character, a mystery writer who actually solves murder mysteries using logic, good sense, observation, and a twinkly sense of humour that masks the sharp brain lurking beneath a very attractive hair do.*
>
> (*Murder, She Wrote* writer, Fischer, 2016)

On paper, recently widowed, retired high school teacher and mystery writer, Jessica Fletcher, is everything a feminist icon should be spirited, independent and free to operate in society with agency (McNamara, 2022). However, this chapter will assert that Jessica's feminism, in being both disguised and subverted, and giving rise to contradictions, follows in the trajectory of the amateur female sleuth from Anna Katherine Green's Amelia Butterworth and Violet Strange[1], to Agatha Christie's Miss Marple[2] and even the Stratemeyer Syndicate's Nancy Drew[3]. Television can shape our attitudes, and can, therefore be an important influencer, impacting on our views about gender, class and race. As such, it is with a sly, undercover feminism that *Murder, She Wrote* achieves more than entertainment value. In part, this subversive feminism is more powerful when considered in the context of the time the series was made and initially aired (1984–1996).

Like the amateur female sleuths who had gone before her, Jessica Fletcher's character challenges the archetypal feminine role. She is older, independent, wealthy and free of the responsibilities associated with motherhood and marriage. Yet, while Jessica's character is imbued with qualities that enable independence and freedom, she presents a contradiction in being gently feminist while accommodating hegemonic ideals. From her conservative clothes to her modest manners and outlook on life, Jessica portrays a quiet feminism much like her predecessor, the first amateur female sleuth, Miss Amelia Butterworth, the creation of American writer, Anna Katherine Green. Both characters operate outside the expected societal norms in being positioned as a spinster, in Amelia's case, and a widow in Jessica's. They are in effect 'desexualised' and free of heteronormative expectations, thus gaining a privileged status by not being limited in relation to their gender.

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Murder, She Wrote set out to be a cosy crime procedural in the tradition of the lone sleuth, with Jessica presenting a challenge to the stereotypical portrayal of the female as mother, grandmother or vixen. Instead, Jessica is seen as a productive and dynamic member of society. In fact, even the opening credits of *Murder, She Wrote* are a subtle nod to feminism since we see Jessica jauntily riding her bicycle, greeting those in her community. The bicycle as a mode of transport has been credited with providing women with enhanced social mobility, becoming a symbol of emancipation. From the outset, it had been decided that Jessica Fletcher would be 'unencumbered by children or a husband', and she was in part inspired by Miss Marple[4] along with aspects of the writer Agatha Christie herself, to create a 'meta-sleuth' with 'a twinkly sense of humour that masks the sharp brain lurking beneath a very attractive hairdo' (Nathalie Atkinson).

Peter S. Fischer, Richard Levinson and William Link's creation of *Murder, She Wrote* came at a time when television's crime series tended to be set on the gritty streets of New York, with the exception being *Magnum P.I.* (1980–1988), which was set in Hawaii. Often these police procedural dramas leaned towards the hardboiled noir: loner protagonists with no familial ties, as in the case of *Miami Vice's* narcotic detective, Sonny Crockett. In *Miami Vice* (1984–1989), the criminal underworld was offset with glamourous locations, flashy cars and the fashionable clothes of Crockett and his partner, Ricardo Tubbs. The series was notable for its interracial partnership of Crockett and Tubbs. New York set *Cagney and Lacey* (1982–1988) with storylines that addressed sexism, racism, domestic violence and rape was ground-breaking in its pairing of two female leads. Then along came the formulaic, cosy, crime drama of *Murder, She Wrote*.

When the show first aired in 1984, women were under-represented on screen and often given lesser-quality roles compared to their male counterparts (Gunter, 1995). Significantly, media portrayals of gender reinforce a hegemonic ideology, positioning men as being superior to women as was evidenced in shows like *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981) and *Hart to Hart* (1979–1984). American network television is considered a powerful social force that assumes important and complex social functions in contemporary society (Kellner), promoting capitalist values and social conformity.[5] The second wave of feminism[6] marked what was billed as the feminist 'sex wars', fighting for equality in the workplace, on the domestic front and for reproductive rights. It was built on the notion that all women shared a universality of experience. As a concept, this was challenged by a third wave feminism movement[7] that sought to address difference through the inclusion of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's intersectionality, which addresses race and diversity, showing how women of colour are doubly marginalised.

Against the backdrop of the Third Wave, what makes *Murder, She Wrote* stand out is the use of an older female investigator. According to Lisa Dresner, in being an older woman Jessica is desexualised, therefore appealing to both male and female audiences (Dresner). Jessica meets prejudice

that assumes she is, what Anna Katherine Green's Amelia Butterworth before her was considered, 'a meddlesome old maid' (Green, 1897), but rather than be undermined by this, Jessica, like Amelia Butterworth and Miss Marple, plays to these gendered expectations and uses them to her advantage. Green's novels and short stories centre the female experience at a time when society undervalued women and is transgressive in positioning the female as the narrative authority. According to Green's biographer, Patricia Maida, her work provides a social history of the period from the point of view of a woman while also offering a representation of female authority that subverts societal expectations. Furthermore, she subverts the archetype of women as being nosy, gossipy and digressive by using these traits to form part of the plot. For instance, on seeing the dead body in *That Affair Next Door,* Miss Butterworth feels sick and comes close to fainting, before she comments, 'it would never do for me to lose my wits in the presence of a man who had none too many of his own' (Green, 1897, p. 11). Such astute asides assert a certain narrative authority, although as Madelyn Dirrim comments it is a 'masculine" authority beneath the facade of the limited authority typically granted to private, first-person woman narrators' (Dirrim, 2021). For Miss Butterworth, the investigation is almost an inevitable outcome of nosiness and curiosity about those around her. Jessica displays this same interest in people that helps her to investigate crimes. Similarly, when we are first introduced to Marple, in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), we are told she is, 'a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner', and later we are told she is 'that wizened-up old maid' (Christie, 1930). Applying logic and astute powers of observation, along with an understanding of human nature and psychology are central to the distinctive characteristics associated with the amateur sleuth. In being positioned outside of the official police investigation ranks, the amateur sleuth is required to have insider knowledge of the closed community wherein the crime has occurred and to 'read' those involved for information pertaining to the mystery. The female sleuth relies on problem solving steeped in knowledge relating to the comings and goings of their communities, coupled with an astute understanding of human nature.

Jessica's catch phrase of variations of the line, 'Now, I may be wrong, but frankly, I doubt it' was first used in Season 1, Episode 1 *The Murder of Sherlock Holmes.* This catch phrase suggests a confidence in her own skills and abilities, but in prefacing her ability with, 'I may be wrong' Jessica is playing into the preconceived notions of her abilities as being doubtful. When Lt Faraday comments that writing is a good hobby for women, saying, 'You can cook up some supper, you can chat on the phone, then pop over to the old typewriter now and then for a few minutes', Jessica bitingly retorts, 'Yes, when I am not too busy beating laundry against the rocks in the river' (*Murder, She Spoke*, season 3, episode 22, 1987). In other words, Faraday's thoughts are outdated and misogynist. In playing to gendered and aged expectations, and also challenging, then Jessica affirms her narrative authority.

Traditionally, the female figure on television during the 1980s was seen as the 'other', a foil to the male hero and understood in terms of her sexuality. As Myrna A. Hant states, 'Prime time television shows for more than 50 years have presented a typically consistent portrayal of older people, especially women, as ridiculous, interfering, obsessed with the family, and incapable of functioning outside the home' (Hant, 2014). Instead of being presented as comedic, eccentric or foolish, Jessica is portrayed as progressive, intelligent, affluent and astute. Her career success as a former teacher, as a writer of crime fiction compliments her abilities as an amateur sleuth. She takes on each career and exceeds in it almost as if by chance which avoids threatening gender norms. Her writing career happens seemingly by chance when Jessica's nephew Grady, sends her manuscript to a publishing house, who then offer to publish it. To this news, Jessica says: 'I'm not a writer. Look, I … I was just filling in time after your uncle died'. This apparently self-deprecating statement is how she manages to inhabit her careers successfully without undermining gender expectations. In this sense, she is therefore *subtly* feminist.

As a widow, Jessica is seen as being outside of the social norm that would see her contained and limited by the patriarchal gender norms. It is in remaining self-actualised and fully confident in her abilities that Jessica provides an alternative to the traditional characterisation that sees the female character either in terms of maternal qualities or as the femme fatale. In *The Murder of Sherlock Holmes* episode, Jessica, on the cusp of solving the mystery says, 'Now, I may be wrong, but, frankly, I doubt it' (Levinson et al., 1984). This illustrates an assuredness that is masked with a pretence of deference to the other characters, like Seth with his medical knowledge or Amos with his police training and in this episode, to police chief Gunderson.

While the male characters in Jessica's life are deferred to on one level, her character also illustrates that women can be successful in both their professional and personal lives, without reliance on a male companion. Seth and Amos are regular companions for Jessica and uses them for access to insider knowledge, logistical purposes when getting around and for their friendship which she values. She also has romantic liaisons, and this ensures that Jessica operates successfully in the heteronormative society rather than being apart from it. As such, this means that her feminism can go under the radar without damaging the status quo.

Murder, She Wrote, like Green's novels and short stories, offers a subversive presentation of the female character that is integrated into the classic crime fiction clue puzzle structure. As such Jessica, Amelia Butterworth Green's other notable female character, Violet Strange, operates within a traditional framework which gives cover to their subversive feminism. Violet Strange, the female detective in a collection of short stories published by Green in 1915 also defies social expectations in establishing her credibility as an amateur sleuth. In 'The Golden Slipper' she is described as 'a small, quaint woman whose naturally quaint appearance was accentuated by the extreme simplicity of her attire'. Violet, like Jessica dresses to please herself, but in

'The Golden Slipper' she wears a family heirloom, 'a filigree pendant of extraordinary sapphires which had once belonged to Maire Antoinette' to entice a suspected thief. Jessica in much the same way uses social occasions to gain access to information relevant to her cases. In *Widow, Weep for Me* (season 2, episode 1, 1985), Jessica uses a similar ploy to detect a killer. Having received a letter from her old friend, Antoinette Farnsworth, asking for help, Jessica travels to a Caribbean hotel in disguise. The friend is thought to have been robbed of her jewellery and then died by suicide. Jessica arrives under the pseudonym, Margurite Canfield, and according to the local police chief, 'dressed in a manner that can only invite trouble'. Later she has her purse stolen and a hotel security person who says that it's his job to watch guests who 'are dumb enough - excuse me, ma'am - to wear that kind of jewellery out in plain sight'. Like Violet Strange in *The Golden Slipper,* who leaves her necklace on a dresser close to an open window, Jessica is not adverse of putting herself in danger to glean information.

In Green's work, much like Christie's, crime is presented as an individual failing and the main objective of the narrative is bringing resolution and restoration of the status quo. Violence is sanitised with the murders occurring out of sight. The closed society of New York high society in Green's novels or the country houses of Christie's settings provide plentiful opportunity for personal entanglements and long harboured resentments. All is tied up nicely in the dénouement with order being restored. However, to regard the books as being rigid in their formula is to overlook Green and Christie's skills in authorial misdirection and sleight of hand in challenging gender norms and the dominant social order. This sleight of hand goes beyond the investigation since it is employed to say more about society than simply to describe a murder mystery, for the characters of Miss Marple and Amelia Butterworth challenge cultural invisibility, which often occurs for older women, and uses it to her advantage. Jessica, as an older women character, also challenges the stereotype of the docile old lady who was often portrayed as the grandmother and 'othered'. Yet, as Kathy Mezei has asserted, this challenging of power and gender relations is somewhat undermined and ambiguous, since the aim of the narrative intention is to see justice delivered and the status quo restored (Mezei, 2007). It is through the character of the amateur older female sleuth that Christie can be transgressive and subversive. For instance, Miss Marple, like Jessica, can use assumptions made about her to her advantage. While her intelligence, rationale and logic are being undermined she is busy ensuring that she solves the crime.

The milieu of Amelia Butterworth, Violet Strange, Miss Marple and Jessica is a domestic one. They challenge crimes using wily intuition, intense observation of human behaviour based in psychology that challenges the overt logic associated with a detective figure like Sherlock Holmes. This positioning of the female sleuth as a reader of human psychology challenges the dominant social order that assumes superiority in masculine problem solving being steeped in logic and science. Yet, what *Murder, She Wrote*, Green and Christie

are suggesting through their protagonists is that logic can be found in the analysis of the minutiae of human life. In *The Body in the Library* (1942), Sir Henry recognises that while Miss Marple is seen as being 'fluttering and dithering' (Christie, p. 96) and has a 'sweet, placid spinsterish face', she also processes a 'mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity and taken in all in the days' work' (1942, p. 96). She is not to be undermined, and when her success is patronisingly referred to as 'women's intuition', she rebukes this and calls it specialised knowledge that she has ascertained through observing 'parallels from village life' (p. 96). Yet, in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, intuition, she states, 'is like reading a word without having to spell it out' (p. 98). The observations direct the reader where to look, sometimes as a means of misdirection with gossip, eavesdropping and voyeurism being employed to glean information. In *That Affair Next Door*, Amelia states that she has 'an intuition' that is 'backed by certain reasons' (Green, 1897).

Despite appearing to be merely gardening or bird watching, 'Miss Marple always sees everything' (p. 17). Her activities appear deceptively innocuous, but she is 'seen' by the vicar as using her pastimes as a means of spying. Furthermore, they represent modes of control for those who are typically without power (Mezei, 2007, p. 108). It is in positioning Miss Marple as using archetypally feminine modalities, such as nosiness and gossip, that Christie is taking a feminist stand to challenge the cultural hegemony that subjugates women. Furthermore, in being positioned as a spinster, those around her assume that she knows nothing of life and is thus further undermined. Yet, it is being unencumbered by the heteronormative demands of being a wife and mother that she can indulge in her ruse of feminine pursuits such as gardening and knitting to eavesdrop and fully immerse herself in village life. She poses no apparent threat to the patriarchy and can therefore make important observations.

So, in this trajectory of crime fiction where does feminist crime fiction and Jessica Fletcher's character fit in? Despite the prevalence of female writers in the Golden Age of crime fiction, what is known as 'feminist crime writing' did not come into being until the 1970s and 1980s, with writers like Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky, P. D. James and Sue Grafton taking up the cause. Though it is worth noting that Dorothy L. Sayers, writing at the same time as Christie, published *Gaudy Night* in 1935. This novel with its female protagonist, Harriet Vane, and its reflection on a woman's right to an intellectual life, is often described as the first feminist crime novel. In contrast, Christie's feminist credentials have long been questioned, since on one hand she positions female characters centrally, allowing them to be both investigators and murderers, she also restores the status quo of the patriarchal order.

The American hardboiled tradition of the 1920s offered a tough, unsentimental outlook steeped in a gritty realism that positioned the masculine as the hero and the feminine as the femme fatale and the provocateur. Women in the hardboiled are often portrayed as a threat to the hero's wellbeing, encroaching on his solitary life and placing him in danger. This is the antithesis of Jessica Fletcher. Instead, she is unapologetically her own person and while she may

play to the societal expectation that she is a docile, passive figure, she does so in order to glean information. And furthermore, while the hardboiled investigator is using the investigation to work out anxieties pertaining to their own crisis of masculinity, the trope of the older amateur sleuth offers insight into anxieties concerning female roles dictated to by a patriarchal society.

Like Miss Marple, Jessica displays a strong sense of justice and a desire to see good sense prevail. The murders often involve her family and friends, although there are knowing nods that the death rate of Cabot Cove is somewhat questionable. Similarly, motives in crime fiction of the Golden Age often related to self-interest, property, money, sexual jealousy, bigamy, wills and inheritance with the setting being the closed environment of the country houses. For *Murder, She Wrote*, the closed setting is Jessica's domain in Cabot Cove or beyond, wherever she may find herself. And like the 'cosy' mysteries of the Golden Age the plots of *Murder, She Wrote* are reassuring in conservative outlook, with somewhat predictable outcomes, often glamorise settings and tidy resolutions. Yet, this cosy domain and formulaic genre is as stealthily subversive as Jessica herself for the plots range from predatory men, loan sharks, poison pen letters, KGB spies to East German defectors. Like the Golden Age amateur sleuth, Jessica operates alone and is unconstrained by the officialdom of police procedures. However, while having a good relationship with the local police force, both in Cabot Cove and beyond, ensures that the social order is restored, and justice delivered, it does limit Jessica's feminist transgressive power in that she is reliant on the traditional, masculine power structures.

As Rebecca Feasey states, 'The police and crime drama genre is one of the most masculine on television because it tends to focus on the public sphere, professional role and the male world of work, and is also one of the most tired and passé representations of hegemonic masculinity on the small screen' (Feasey). If crime fiction and the hardboiled are masculine, then this chapter asserts that the mystery is feminine and in the television series *Murder, She Wrote,* to be feminine, is to be supreme. While femininity is often considered the embodiment of a nurturing and kind nature, in the character of Jessica Fletcher, it has a stealthy underbelly that the performance of female gender manages to hide, often to her advantage.

According to a column in the *Los Angeles Times*, 'Angela Lansbury in "Murder, She Wrote" wasn't "cozy" — she was revolutionary', in being 'something that is still rare on television: a woman who understands her own worth' (McNamara, 2022). In reading Jessica's character for information pertaining to her social status and ideological leanings, we can assert that she is financially secure, conservative in her choice of clothing and desexualised as being a widow without being frigid. She is the absolute authority of her own life, deciding when she works, where she travels and whom she sees. While her romantic life is hinted at and sometimes would-be suitors are featured, Jessica remains single not out of a desire to avoid judgement but as a signifier of her life being fulfilling as it is. Additionally, it is clear that Jessica Fletcher's character is central to the series' success. She is unassuming, wry, intuitively

intelligent with a knowingness and certainty that makes her an ideal investigator. Like Miss Marple, Amelia Butterworth and Violet Strange, while Jessica's insights and knowledge originate from a feminine based wisdom, that relies on intuition and close understanding of the domestic life of those around her, she cloaks it in a masculine based logic and rationale. This serves to play to patriarchal notions of how we can 'perform' identity.

In considering Jessica's character, it is useful to employ Judith Butler's account of performative gender, which has been crucial to the development of feminist theory. Butler asserts that gender roles are imposed upon us by society and that identity is 'instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler, p. 519). Therefore, gender is a social construction, based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity rather than tied to material bodily facts. Butler argues that 'the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all' (Butler, p. 178). In being widowed, Jessica is without familial obligations and her career success as a writer means that she is independently wealthy. Subsequently, Jessica manages to disrupt the notion that as a female she should be acting in certain prescribed ways, and in doing so, she moves beyond the gendered norms that society expects of her.

This performance of gender is not without complications for according to the dominant narrative of hegemonic masculinity to be 'seen' as feminine is to be considered weak. Jessica's character has a soft bouffant of blonde hair, she wears sensible clothes: 'leisure suits' and pleated skirts with cashmere cardigans and smart blouses. She carries a handbag and wears a Burberry trench coat and always completes her look with jewellery. The wardrobe choices for Jessica's character manifest the gendered nature of the presentation of the female investigator. Yet, while it positions Jessica as instinctively feminine, it does so in a way as to present her as being capable, authoritative and glamorous. As an older woman, Jessica is not expected to dress in an alluring or sexual manner, which in turn allows for a wider identification from the audience. The focus is not on Jessica's body, but rather her wily intuition and good sense.

Nevertheless, Jessica's reliance on intuition is not without complications. When it comes to rationality and intuition, the male mind is considered rational, whereas women are aligned to intuitive thought. Jessica's use of feminine intuitive knowingness can feel less than feminist since she appears to be accommodating the masculine notion of the female being aligned with corporeality. When she appears to be working on intuition alone, the viewer is made aware of the various details that Jessica has noticed that backs up her perceptions. This underscores that the masculine aligned rationale and logic are prized above wily feminine intuition.

In contrast, so-called 'cop' shows are frequently synonymous with car chases and guns, which Dresner considers both 'different markers of capability'. Jessica doesn't own a gun and cannot drive, which Dresner asserts means that Jessica's agency is limited, in that she is reliant on men for transporting her to places she needs to go. However, just as Jessica is covert in utilising misconceptions of her abilities, she also uses her inability to drive as a means of gleaning information

surreptitiously. In *Hit, Run and Homicide*, (season 1, episode 6, 1984), a fatality occurs when what appears to be a driverless car runs down a wealthy businessman, and Jessica is permitted to join the Sheriff on the investigation as research for her next book, takes them to an overgrown area, 'No. If you jogged every morning like I do, you'd learn something'. Jessica shows that her apparent limitations can be useful for finding out information that would normally be missed.

Like Miss Marple, Jessica also analyses body language and inferences to understand the psychology at play. In *The Phantom Killer* (season 10, episode 4, 1993), Jessica is in New York for meetings and is to be interviewed by a hapless, young reporter, Ben. When a ruthless and unscrupulous rival magazine publisher is electrocuted in his bathtub, Ben becomes the prime suspect. The police authority, Artie, a friend of Jessica's, is distracted by the thought of a weekend away with his wife, Doris, and some friends in the Catskills. He is all too eager to accept a tidy and speedy conclusion to the investigation, despite Jessica's reservations. As ever Jessica's wily intuition is on display: the writer has been masquerading as an aggressive, domineering literary agent, inspired by his rereading of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, in order to secure better writing jobs. But despite his confession, Jessica realises that he is innocent of killing the magazine publisher.

In *Weave a Tangled Web* (season 5, episode 10, 1989), sexual politics are addressed head on when the murder of a womanising gambler leads to double lives being exposed. In a scene with Jessica and Seth travelling in a car they discuss the case, while also exposing Seth's outdated views on women. Seth decrees that, 'It isn't natural' for a man to stay at home, undertaking the domestic chores while his wife is the main earner. The conversation positions Jessica as being feminist in her outlook as she says:

Jessica:	Is that right? And where have you been for the past 25 years?
Seth:	Well, not lettin' some woman support me.
Jessica:	She's not supporting him. He has his own tax business. But even if she was, why shouldn't a woman be the breadwinner
Seth:	Now, that is where the wheels come off the rails, isn't it? Jessica: Somehow, I feel I'm about to be served a helping of your homespun Victorian philosophy. Can't have it both ways, Jess. Sauce for the goose, they say. Woman goes out into the world, holds down a good job, dumps her natural responsibilities off onto someone else-
Jessica:	Did I say Victorian? (*chuckles*) I think I meant Neanderthal.
Seth:	Then she looks around, sees that the pasture is not only green, but full of playmates. Figures what the old man doesn't know won't hurt him.
Jessica:	Very convincing. Guilt by role reversal.

Jessica is clear in her assertion that women should have the right to be treated as equal to men, while Seth displays his belief that women's social value is determined by biological forces – 'natural responsibilities' – and aligned

with domesticity. Seth's position is that to challenge this dominant social order poses risks and ultimately death.

In conclusion, *Murder, She Wrote* is progressive and subversive in its portrayal of the older, female amateur sleuth and the character of Jessica is the natural successor to the female sleuths discussed in this chapter. In keeping with the cosy crime subgenre, it was positioned as family viewing and as such was able to reach a wide audience. Defying the stereotype of the older woman, Jessica Fletcher, uses her intelligence, logic and canny ability to understand the psychology of motivation and human behaviour. Her childlessness is not portrayed as feminine failure but instead sets her up to be self-sufficient and free to travel, doing as she pleases. She fulfils a maternal role in relation to her nephew, enabling her to have a sense of family belonging without the being burdened by the restrictions of responsibility. Additionally, Jessica's character is portrayed as having agency, autonomy and certainty in her abilities. Following the line of the female amateur sleuth from Amelia Butterworth to Miss Marple to Violet Strange and later Nancy Drew, we can see that Jessica belongs on this continuum of investigators who employ their innate sense of intuition coupled with understanding of human psychology to solve mysteries and tackle wrongdoing. Jessica is able to move through her fictional world, seemingly unperturbed by the social barriers that women often face. The apparent contradictions of this mean that Jessica is in fact operating as a subversive undercover feminist.

Notes

1 Anna Katharine Green (November 11, 1846–April 11, 1935) was one of the first writers of detective fiction in America. While male writers like Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) and Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) are often credited with the creation of crime fiction as we know it today, the Golden Age of crime writing, dominated by female writers, emerged between the two wars (1920s and 1930s) and was just as significant in establishing the genre.

2 Christie's Miss Marple Novels are: *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930); *The Body in the Library* (1942); *The Moving Finger* (1943); *A Murder is Announced* (1950); *They Do it With Mirrors* (1952); *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953); *4.50 from Paddington* (1957); *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*(1962); *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964); *A Bertram's Hotel* (1965); *Nemesis* (1971); *and Sleeping Murder* (1976).

3 Created in the 1930s by the Stratemeyer Syndicate of writers, the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories were first published in 1930.

4 Miss Marple was in part inspired by Green's Amelia Butterworth. It is also worth noting that Green's *Leavenworth Case* (1878) came before Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).

5 *Murder, She Wrote* emerged at a time when U.S. politics were steeped in Ronald Reagan's conservative and traditional views. In Britain, Margaret Thatcher, the so-called Iron Lady, had been in power from 1979, presenting an image of leadership that employed masculine traits to succeed in a Cabinet full of men. Popular culture was dominated by the heady sexuality of Madonna, supermodels and power dressing, as influenced by Joan Collins' character, the ruthless Alexa, in *Dynasty* (1981–1989).

6 The second wave of the feminist movement took place during the 1960s and 1970s and focused on issues of equality and discrimination.

7 The third wave of feminism was marked by a period of political activism that sought to expand civil rights and social equality for women and is generally dated from the early 1990s to the 2010s. Third wave feminists strived to highlight the discrepancies between the lived experience of women and the dominant narrative. Central to the Third Wave movement was the idea that women could be empowered through sex. Furthermore, women's representation and invisibility were challenged by Third Wave feminisms with politics of representation being central.

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Part III

Environments and Global Impact of *Murder, She Wrote*

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7 "… Something Sultry and Seductive about This Place"

New Orleans in the *Murder, She Wrote* Imagination

Jill E. Anderson

When the Louisiana State Press issued the essay collection *The Tacky South* in 2022, the editors and I, making the publicity circuit, received the same comment over and over: "*Murder, She Wrote* took place in Maine, not the South!" The problem? I had contributed an essay that centered on the undisputedly Southern Blanche from *The Golden Girls* and the Yankee Jessica Fletcher in *MSW* and their associations with images of tacky white Southerners. People kept insisting that Jessica Fletcher's link to the South was non-existent, but in its entire 264-episode run, only 54 episodes of *MSW* take place in Cabot Cove, ME, Jessica's hometown and a decidedly un-Southern locale. However, as an internationally known bestselling mystery author, Jessica is also a consummate traveler, taking to planes, trains, and automobiles to traverse the globe and solve murders for her seemingly endless slew of friends and family. Maine cannot contain her multitudes. Therefore, the show repeatedly, depending on the episode's location, transmits the aesthetics of culture and region to its primetime audience, often depending on stereotypes and regional images to argue for the place-ness of a storyline.

This chapter expands my previous work in *The Tacky South* to specifically examine the ways that Jessica's encounters with and inside the U.S. South serve as the vehicles through which images of problematic yet ultimately cozy Southernness are transmitted. Rather than establishing a unified and singular definition of "The South," I start by drawing on literary regionalism's definition of place to decipher the ways Jessica's engagement with the South and its people comes to construct that shorthand. Critical regionalism comes to be defined, instead, by "the emphasis is not on what regions are but why they are that way, on what they do as much as what has been done to them" (Powell 7). The South particularly, as a distinct if slippery and indefinable region, provides an "insistence on places and their cultural artifacts as dense palimpsests of broader forces represents an intentional challenge to the tradition of 'regionalism'" (19). While Jessica witnesses various serious political and social issues within the region, the show ultimately retreats from fully engaging with more challenging and egregious systemic issues—namely, racism, sexism, and class distinctions—in order to "provide a televisual shorthand" for Southern stereotypes and aesthetics (Hinrichsen et al., 2). Jessica functions as the mediator,

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an educated Yankee interloper of literary local color ilk, comfortably engaging with Southerners from all backgrounds and experiences. As both detective and traveler, Jessica occupies a unique position in the communities she visits. She is both a part of and apart from these places, playing the unattached busybody lending a moralistic air to the place and showing local law enforcement just exactly who runs the world.

Serving as the foil that seemingly softens any real conflict in the hour-long dramatic format, Jessica eases the TV audience, which serves as the imagined community here, into easily consumable images of an often-nostalgic South. The symbology of the South, mediated through Jessica and her relationships to the place and people who inhabit it, bolster the idea that television "has functioned as a medium for fantasies of national cohesion, confirmation, and compensation that intertwines politics with seemingly private personal experience," while the South is "a mediated space and on object of fascination and consumption, has also been a place jettisoned in order to maintain national symbolic coherence" (Hinrichsen 4). Drawing on the idea that "regions painted with 'local color' are traversed by the forgotten history of racial conflict with prior regional inhabitants, and are ultimately produced and engulfed by the centralized capitalist economy that generates the desire for retreat," I argue that despite its attempts to engage with some social justice issues, *MSW* only replicates "vernacular culture" and more stable cultural distinctions between interloper and region, all through the vehicle of a white, educated, self-possessed woman, positioned in a space of separateness and privilege, thus mediating for the audience and cozying up any conflict (Kaplan 256). It is this separateness, the hallmark of local color stories, that functions most strongly here for Jessica as a tourist. When she travels, it is through her protected network of other economically privileged friends. The people she encounters in the South, however, are racially or economically Other, but Other only to Jessica's own objective experiences. In their respective spaces, they are essential components of the setting, only becoming Other as Jessica dips in, pieces together the clues to the murder, and then leaves. As a side note, the very last *MSW* vehicle to be filmed, the made-for-TV movie *The Last Free Man* (2001) posits Jessica's connection to the South is anything but tenuous. On a research trip to Virginia (the "Deep South"), she discovers that her family line traces back to a plantation owner named Sarah McCullough and that Sarah was an enslaver who just happened to be one of the "goodies" who let her enslaved people free. Significantly, Angela Lansbury plays Sarah in the film's flashbacks, creating an immediate and traceable visual cue that Jessica herself, as the descendent of a Southerner and an enslaver no less, has a hidden cultural identity connecting her to the complex racial dynamics of Southern history.

For these reasons, *MSW* is much more than its discussion of setting and the unique cultural artifacts each of those places brings to Jessica's murder-solving. Making use of elements of other modes of storytelling such as noir, the Gothic, and middlebrow detective fiction, *MSW* has the flexibility to be both cultural artifact and cultural producer. In its position as a primetime,

award-winning show with a rotating cast of well-known guest stars and headed by the multiple award-winning, almost EGOT performer Angela Lansbury, *MSW* was able to become an easily digestible cultural artifact meant to lull audiences into cerebral yet accessible storylines. Particularly, the intersection of film noir and Southern Gothic, as R. Bruce Brasell, emphasizes the creation of a stylistic "mood": "While this mood is haunting and accentuates the horrific elements of the text, it is typically associated with another common characteristic assigned to the genre by book reviewers, a mood of existential angst and aloneness" (42). Film noir and Southern Gothic are two sides of a similar coin, according to Brasell, and they work together to express an existential moodiness of a particular historical moment in crime history. Because "[l]andscape and climate are among the strongest contributors to Southern Gothic televisuality," with their "haptic qualities […] of hazy humidity, sunny heat, and a disorienting, distorting haze," the visual markers of Southern-ness are essential (Cherry 464). While *MSW* is not noir or Gothic in their strictest sense, I would argue that the mood created by the show, particularly given the objective sinisterness of the repeated murders, actually revels in wanton human suffering. That most of the murders occur off-stage only highlights the duality between the existential angst of a murder's motivations and the general casualness with which everyone treats criminal behavior. These characteristics aid the episodes in which Jessica travels to the South[1] by easing viewers into familiarity with the landscape while also leveling the visual field and allowing the audience to find comfort in Jessica's navigation of these potentially foreign parts. Besides Ireland, New Orleans is the place to which Jessica travels most often. Given this scope, the New Orleans episodes offer up a unique case study to examine Jessica's role as a tourist and local color observer. The quartet of New Orleans-based mysteries included here are: "Murder to a Jazz Beat" (Season 1, Episode 14, 1985), which sees a jazz great dying while stage, "The Perfect Foil" (Season 2, Episode 21, 1986), a Mardi Gras murder mystery, "Judge Not" (Season 8, Episode 6, 1991), another jazz-centered story, and finally, "Big Easy Murder" (Season 12, Episode 4, 1995), which features voodoo and its practitioners.

In her role as mediator, Jessica "performs a kind of literary tourism in a period that saw the tourist abroad and at home as a growing middleclass phenomenon" (Kaplan 256). While the period Kaplan is referencing here is the one following the American Civil War, in which cultural divides were shaken and stirred to the point of violent conflict, I can make a case about Cold War/Regan era America as a frame from which local color as an important aspect of how the American ideal was expressed in this period. Many South-centered shows entered the television landscape during the 1980s and 1990s (*The Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, *Dallas*, to name a few), and their popularity spoke to America's desire to further establish aspects of American-ness, a landscape laid out for "the mythic location of a vast nostalgia factory" with its own "politics of accountability" (McPherson 3, 18). Therefore, the symbols of the south serve "as powerful cultural assemblages, assemblages that often make new modes of

Southernness more difficult to envision," as Tara McPherson argues, and in particular the South of the 1980s and 1990s popular culture served as a way of reinscribing the region as a site of authenticity and the local at the very moment that globalization blurs the boundaries of the nation. Through these processes, the "Old South" lost its quality as an index of a particular place in time and redeployed as a trope for lost grandeur and gentility. In this way, the South is decanted in its specificity, loosed from particular moorings. There is no pure South now—indeed, there never was—so specific understandings of how the South is represented, commodified, and packaged are key. There is no simple "correct" representation of the South, a single South, but that is not to say that all versions of the South are equal or that the critique of some versions is not a legitimate activity. We need to hold particular images accountable and think through their complex relations to a politics of accountability (11, 18).

The past and present overlap in these representations of the South, causing cultural anxieties on a subjective scale. Because of this, I am interested in the ways Jessica navigates her environments not just as a social being and contingent participant in the actions but also as the site of distillation for a primetime audience. A component of this navigation is the racial tensions rarely addressed in the show, serving as an avoidance of the "politics of accountability" that McPherson references. As a privileged white woman traveling under the protection of her celebrity and network of friends, Jessica rarely encounters overt violence while she witnesses the acts of violences committed against others, never mind the fact that New Orleans, city featured in four episodes of the show, was considered the U.S.'s deadliest city in the time the show was filmed/[2]. As a detached and othered observer, she bypasses much of the discomfort and shame rife in representations of New Orleans as a consummate but unique Southern city.

As a Southern city, New Orleans occupies a unique place in the American imagination. As the Gulf Coast hub for the domestic slave trade with a complex history during the colonial era and the mixing of multiple cultures (West African, Haitian, Spanish, French, and Indigenous, to name a few), New Orleans's position is as a uniquely American, if not deeply Southern, city. With its history of hedonism and carnival alongside its position as a hub of the cotton and sugar industries and a main port for off-loading enslaved peoples, New Orleans has a fraught relationship to capitalism and just how to portray its image to the world. While some would argue that New Orleans is not stereotypically Southern given its distinct history (and that debate could occupy an essay of its own), for my purposes, New Orleans represents a point on the map of the United States that offers a rich cultural shorthand for the Southern charm of a city situated at an American crossroads. Noted now for its award-winning international culinary offerings and its lively and rich music scene, New Orleans has always been portrayed as a worldly city with rough edges and a complicated relationship to racial politics, and that portrayal is true for *MSW*.

Particularly important is how Jessica, as a consummate Mainer/Northerner, travels to and observes the goings-on of her New Orleans friends. But

there is a strange, passing reference to Jessica's possible Southern connection in the episode "The Perfect Foil." In an attempt to persuade Jessica to consider making a permanent move to New Orleans, the dashing and charming police lieutenant Cavette (Cesare Danova) argues for the connection between the Cajun/Acadians' roots in the Northeastern United States. They had the "right idea when they left Maine to move to New Orleans," he remarks, immediately after the observation about New Orleans's reputation for great food and hospitality toward strangers. Her participation as a tourist first signals just how apart she is from the events surrounding her visit. In fact, some historians contend that the post-Reconstruction "New South" depended on the tourism dollars of Northern travelers to spend in the new tourist spaces and bring capital to the region. Reiko Hillyer argues that Southern entrepreneurs and Northern boosters collaborated after Reconstruction to create a "catechism of progress, not only reactionary retreat" in which both parties took advantage of natural resources and cheap labor (not to mention white supremacy) to build up tourist destinations like New Orleans (3). Hillyer notes that the rote mythologies of the Old South, the tendency to hearken back to bucolic and idyllic days of plantation agriculture, would not necessarily appeal to Northern boosters looking to invest in Dixie so individual cities had to craft their own distinct and complex histories. Places like New Orleans were touted as "a leisurely, exotic oasis to attract vacationers" and "a site of Old World romance untouched by modernization" (5). That is, New Orleans is always already a simulacrum for another place and time. But Kevin Fox Gotham, imagining New Orleans as a space of "authenticity," is fraught since it:

> is a notoriously labyrinthine concept that can refer to a variety of idealized representations of culture, identity, place. While authenticity may be a socially constructed representation of reality, it has always been real in its consequences as different groups and organized interests have struggled to create and legitimate meanings of an authentic New Orleans.
>
> (Gotham 6)

In other words, authenticity often relies on stereotypical visual and lexical markers to signal New Orleans's "Southernness" even as those markers impact the lived realities of its citizens and visitors. Whether pastiche of another time and place or "authentic" Southern city or some combination of both, New Orleans is, undeniably, a tourist destination "constructed by whites for whites," as Anthony J. Stanonis points out, as "the image making associated with tourism served as a vehicle to enable whites to popularize racial stereotypes while exaggerating the division between the races" (23). This essay is not meant to provide a comprehensive cultural history of New Orleans and its traditions. Rather, I wish to examine those cultural touchstones that are deemed purely New Orleans that are used as a means of flavoring the tourist trade in the city.

Add to this the fact that as a cozy murder mystery show, *MSW* takes on the quirks of small-town life with its baked-in secrets, neighborly squabbles, and

inefficient police force are central to Jessica's power as an amateur detective. *MSW* is also a middlebrow detective story, as it "offered the escapism of lurid and sensational crime stories, lucid but not simplistic language, and intellectual engagement" (Mills 55). The middlebrow, as a stylistic category, is valuable because it "afforded scholars a liberating vantage point for exploring thematic concerns beyond identifying structural elements and evaluating the mechanics of the genre itself," making room for "escapist" plots and "unrealistic scenarios" (52). Traditionally, middlebrow fiction presented women characters whose main concern was not caring for one's home or romantic relationships, which in turn allowed readers to seek outlets for alternative storylines. Unbound by romantic relationships or constant familial duty and free to travel, Jessica becomes an ideal middlebrow detective and author with mass appeal, "invariably highly professional, very successful, and extremely modest about their work" (Humble 35). I mention these elements of middlebrow detective fiction not because I believe television programming to be definitionally middlebrow. Instead, this is to suggest that Jessica belongs to an established tradition of female detective authors whose physical and social mobility is an empowering asset rather than a hindrance, allowing her to repeatedly navigate cities like New Orleans without letting any form of judgment get in her way of her duty of solving mysteries. As both tourist and partial insider (given how she is always visiting New Orleans with a purpose other than mere tourism or recreation), Jessica does not agitate for a systemic change or leave a lasting mark in these places, as a white, middle-class (mostly) tourist who is not necessarily invested in the long-term success of the places she visits. Despite murders happening so close to her inner circle, she is seemingly protected from any real danger posed by the underworlds in which she traverses not just by her tourist status but also by her moneyed, well-connected acquaintances. Her experience in New Orleans echoes the experience of many white tourists to the city, as she extricates herself like any good visitor, leaving sites like New Orleans much the same even after she has caught the murderer.

Jessica engages with New Orleans and its people as not just a gracious and open guest but also a conduit for softening the more prominent quirks of the city and its inhabitants, interpreting them for a primetime audience that might only be familiar with the more stereotypical aspects of the city. In fact, "Murder to a Jazz Beat" opens with Jessica in conversation with her cab driver, a Black man aptly named Lafayette Duquesne (Garrett Morris), a signal to the city's French Creole moorings, wearing a New Orleans Saints baseball cap who regals her with his own version of a stale beer roux and gumbo recipe along his homely wisdom that as long as people have "good food, good friends, good music, and good conversation—why, a man can't die no ways but happy." Jessica's beneficent reception of the cab driver's folksy talk and her admission that she is a "shameless tourist" centers her experience there as someone who will be fully immersed in the city's offerings until she inevitably leaves. The knowledgeable and enthusiastic cabby is a common trope in film and television, as their profession allows for a vernacular knowledge and engagement

with the tourists who enter their city. For the time being, she is happy to employ Lafayette's local knowledge to help her navigate the city, but tellingly, these interactions are confined to outdoor spaces and Lafayette's cab—spaces seemingly "safe" for a woman traveling on her own. The class distinction between Lafayette and Jessica is inescapable too. The transactional nature of their relationship (cab driver/local and customer/tourist) highlights not only Jessica's ability to pay for Lafayette's knowledge but also the manner in which his knowledge is, at least later on in the episode, for sale. Immediately juxtaposed with Lafayette's downhome earnestness and Southern drawl is Jessica's friend, the radio host Jonathan Hawley (Clive Revill), whose vaguely English accent frames his affected and florid description of New Orleans: "[a] Cajun paradise, the cradle of jazz, oozing the warmth of provincial France, boasting the most succulent culinary delights this side of Paris, tastes and smells worthy of kings and their consorts." These two takes on New Orleans life—Jonathan's and Lafayette's—are meant to be complementary rather than oppositional. Lafayette's local knowledge, which later helps Jessica locate some elusive musicians she must question, and Jonathan's position as patron of the arts and radio host mean that, for Jessica, the experience of New Orleans is varied if divided.

But always the consummate busybody, Jessica quickly runs afoul of the local police detective charged with investigating the sudden death of famous jazz clarinetist, Ben Coleman (Glynn Turman), as she relays her expertise of obscure poisons based on research for one of her novels. The cutthroat world of jazz culminates in a very public murder scene, the Bourbon Street Barn, located in the French Quarter. Historically, musical groups were one of the few places that allowed for whites and Blacks to mix, and jazz bands were certainly no exception. Though the French Quarter is the "unambiguous center of white tourism" in the city, according to Christopher Coady, "performing traditional jazz in the spaces provided by these clubs worked to tell a story about African American agency and progress" while simultaneously commodifying "jazz as a tourist attraction with clear lines of control between white consumers and African American performers, reifying the French Quarter as a white-controlled space" (103–104). Indeed, Coleman's band is mixed, as we would expect from a jazz group, but the backers for Coleman's band are white as well as the venue's owners (who, as a side story, are also involved in illegal smuggling, another sure sign that the seedy underworld of New Orleans is fully present here). Although the Bourbon Street Barn draws a mix of patrons, it is clear who holds the purse and power there. Jessica herself is invited into both the white and Black worlds represented in this episode, it is only at the behest of her friend Jonathan, whose disdain for the New Orleans police is clear, that she gets fully involved in the case. The ineptitude of the police's investigations, their seeming unwillingness to further investigate the suspicious death of a Black man, opens the door for Jessica to swoop in and use her research knowledge and common sense to save the day. But in one of the rare ambivalent and inharmonious endings to an episode, we see Jessica arriving at the cemetery just as a second line for Coleman, playing "When the Saints Go

Marching In,"[3] exits. The gloom of the closing scene is represented by Jessica's sadness at having worked out that the murderer is Coleman's protégé, young Eddie Walters (Stan Shaw), who poisoned Coleman's clarinet reed to protect Coleman's wife Callie (Olivia Cole) from being murdered by Coleman herself because she knew he had lied in court about a murder he and his brother had committed when they were young. It is a twisty ending, true, replete with unrequited love, a chivalrous young man, and a disloyal husband. But Jessica's ordering influence and apparent despondency at Walters's misdeed only reinforces that Coleman was, indeed, a disloyal, bad man who seemingly deserved his reckoning. Jessica's melancholic headshaking at Walters's downfall reads as self-righteous, a comforting way for the television audience to both pity and fear Coleman's murderer. But we know she will be walking away from it all at the end, unaffected in the long run.

Another jazz-centered episode comes in the form of "Judge Not," which opens with a funeral and the second line for another dead jazz great, Daddy Coop. Jessica's remark that "New Orleans does know how to say goodbye to the ones it loves" references New Orleans's well-known celebration of death, and despite her friendship with the Black family at the center of Coop's story, it is her relations with her own private Southern gentleman wannabe gigolo Prosecutor Andy Henley (William Atherton) that facilitates the solving of the mystery. "It's very dangerous for you to walk at a New York pace in a Southern town," he warns Jessica. "It's the wrong rhythm. See, we're all languid down here. It's just something in the air. Am I talking too slowly?" Henley's references to the unhurried, laidback pace of New Orleans is not just a reference to the heat and humidity which can slow anyone's tracks. His use of the word "languid" is meant to soothe and placate Jessica, as if he is trying to lull her into a sense of security. In fact, since we later find that he is, in fact, responsible for the long-ago revenge murder of jazz singer Luna Santee, whom Henley labels a "beautiful woman of color," and who left his white judge father for the Black jazz musician, the exchange takes on a more sinister tone. "We're very impulsive in our languid way," he further states, almost a threat to Jessica whose reputation as an amateur detective surely has preceded her. But, because Henley belongs to the established landed Southern aristocracy, owners of Henley Plantation (which they have tactfully renamed Henley House), Jessica has little reason to suspect him at first. As she affects a Southern accent to tell him, "You do your city proud," as a passing horse and carriage, in full fairy tale fashion, comes to pick her up. There are, effectively, two different worlds in this version of New Orleans—the wealthy, white privileged world to which Henley belongs, the world that has allowed him to get away with the murder for twenty years. And there is the world of Coop's family, rife with superstition (the matriarch of the Coop family declares Santee is a witch), pain, loss, with its inheritor the hard-bitten and resentful Detective John Coop, Jr. (Randy Brooks). Though Jessica moves comfortably between the two worlds, belonging to neither in any real way, there is no mention of the privilege that has allowed Henley to evade justice nor the very tired trope of a jealous white

man murdering an autonomous and powerful Black woman for slighting his family. In fact, all of that pain is shuffled aside to allow for a characteristically tidy ending we get at the episodes close—John Coop, Jr. is back with his family, dedicating a museum to his father's memory, while the multiracial crowd enjoys the music of the multiracial jazz band.

There is arguably nothing more New Orleans, besides jazz and second lines, than Mardi Gras, so it is no surprise that Mardi Gras serves New Orleans cultural shorthand in "The Perfect Foil." When Jessica is sent by her concerned Aunt Mildred (Penny Singleton) to take a detour from Houston to check on her late husband's second cousin Calhoun Fletcher (Peter Bonerz), Jessica is dropped in the midst of the last night of Mardi Gras. There are no hotel rooms available, the closest one being Baton Rouge, as the hotel clerk points out, and this is a sure sign that the city is full of tourists there for Mardi Gras. Dubbed "the greatest free show on Earth" in a 1967 *Southern Living* feature by Charles "Pie" Dufour, Mardi Gras has become synonymous with New Orleans. Though New Orleans's city officials "struggled to balance careful organization and control of Mardi Gras's distinctiveness with preserving the illusion of unchecked revelry and hedonism that tourists had come to expect," the Carnival celebration supports a year-round trade industry in the city (Souther 134). In the mid-80s, the time in which Jessica travels to New Orleans, Mardi Gras had transformed into a "carefully planned, elite-controlled civic enactment with the semblance of a broad participation" (Souther 147). Jessica's experience of Mardi Gras certainly echoes this elitism, as she navigates the revelers in her smart navy skirt suit and pussy bow contrasted with everyone else's carnival masks and costumes. But her outsider status is twofold—she is not only *not* a tourist coming to New Orleans *for* Mardi Gras, she is also kept apart from the locals and their intrigues. Even as she is marked as an outsider, she is firmly planted in this tourist-driven version of Mardi Gras, at home there even as she is seemingly alien. As she rides in a cab down Lafitte Street (a bastardization of Lafitte Ave., a street that runs through downtown), it is more sparsely populated with revelers (a grim reaper, a human banana, a woman in a bejeweled poncho, an ersatz cop), lit by gas lamp, and covered in ticker tape and confetti. The scene is not much different inside the house. Let into the Lafitte Sporting Club (an upscale but illegal gambling den) by a beefcake of a bouncer in an executioner's mask, handed a drink by Napoleon, a mask by some kind of vampire queen (who admonishes her for being "out of uniform"), and a cape by Sir Walter Raleigh, Jessica claims to be overwhelmed by the "Southern hospitality" she is being shown (by, it turns out, these people from New Jersey). There is, however, no sniff of krewes or balls or Bacchanalia events or the racial origins of Mardi Gras here. Nearly everyone is white and contained within these house parties, participating in a disorganized, alcohol-fueled revelry that is seemingly safe (save for the sole murder victim), while the chaos of the Mardi Gras costumes facilitate the framing of Cousin Cal. But the intrigue at the heart of this murder has Jessica trafficking in possible high-powered political connections and the well-heeled seeming mobsters running the sporting club.

Finally, the trifecta of the New Orleans cultural shorthand is closed with the voodoo-centered episode "Big Easy Murder." Carolyn Morrow Long argues that historically, mentions of voodoo placed the emphasis on "the possible threat to white authority, not on the inherent sinfulness of these practices," with suppression of the religion connected to racist views against its African practitioners" (87). However, voodoo is now portrayed in a white-centered and tourist-driven context as "exotic, titillatingly sinful, or comical," with its dangers now seemingly erased (95). Because the practice of voodoo "entails both religion and commerce," and "the history and long-standing cultural impact of Voodoo on the city made it a familiar stand-in for a myriad of pejorative behaviors heaped on both individuals and the Black community writ large to mark them as exotic and dangerous," particularly in local newspaper stories from the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries (Roberts 664). Given these implications, it is easy to see why the emphasis on threat and sinfulness amps up the stakes for the white characters of "Big Easy Murder." Opening with the machete murder (the fourth in three months) of a white journalist chasing a story about supper club turf wars, the episode immediately marks voodoo as both mysterious and threatening. Jessica herself is apart from these threats, though, housed in the comfortable mansion of Senator Brent Renwick (Mitchell Ryan) and his wife. When Jessica reveals that that same journalist was helping with her research on "voodoo, illegal gambling, jazz, contemporary New Orleans" and (the now-mythical) Marie Laveau, she states this all matter-of-factly, conflating all these things in some kind of mishmash of New Orleans's darker side. Here is where the "Big Easy" part of the episode's title comes into play. The nickname is rumored to have come about because of the city's reputation as a slow, laidback place, along with its lax attitude toward social vices and its emphasis on pleasure and hedonism as a social outlet. So, when Lt. Tibideaux (G.W. Bailey), in a rare (for the series) nod to contemporary facts, makes note of New Orleans as the city with the highest murder rate in the U.S., Jessica's dismissal of this fact does not seem out of place. She knows she is protected within the walls of the senator's home (at least until the murderer crosses the threshold to kill him) because she is not *of* this place and is not subject to its dangers.

But the specter of danger follows Jessica to the Goula Ruins[4], a gathering site for voodoo practitioners. In a bit of creative set design, the scene is rife with the perilous and exotic and is reminiscent of the voodoo scenes in the James Bond film "Live and Let Die" (1973). Accompanied by a drum beat and chanting, the practitioners dance in all-white robes and turbans, guide a sacrificial goat around, hang their shoulders with large snakes, and hold flaming torches aloft. Jessica and Vera Wells (Juliette Jeffers), who serves as Jessica's guide to this heretofore forbidden site, observe the ritual from a safe spot in the tree, apart from the main action. These two become stand-ins for the television audience, keeping their observational distance, looking upon the voodoo practitioners as the subject of an anthropological study. They are safe, that is, until the well-lit eyes and sinister laugh of Ralph Danton (Clifton Powell)

becomes the true danger here. Donning a machete medallion, which "warns that you stay silent, mind your business, or else," as Vera informs Jessica. Danton is not just violent and controlling toward Vera, he is also a mobster's heavy, and he poses, in stereotypical antebellum/Jim Crow South fashion, as a rapacious threat to white woman Jessica as he follows her around the city (including to, of course, Café du Monde). But no one, including Vera who runs an Africa-forward, voodoo curio shop, seems to buy into voodoo as a real, powerful force until Yvette Dauphin (Olivia Cole, in a repeat *MSW* performance) is caught making voodoo dolls of Senator Renwick. The heart of this issue between Yvette and Renwick? A possible case of miscegenation, that specter of Southern race mixing that haunts quite a few Southern Gothic tales. Though the claim that Renwick fathered Yvette's daughter Priscilla (Anne-Marie Johnson), the sultry, jazzy lounge singer in the episode, is unfounded, this side story exists to further illustrate that Jessica is, in fact, in the South. Ultimately, all the claims of voodoo here are so many red herrings, a bit of atmosphere and set dressing designed to support Jessica's reason for being in New Orleans this time. "I think I've had my fill of voodoo for awhile," she tosses off with a laugh at the episode's end, leaving the senator's house with a promise to return soon, no sign she is scarred by this encounter with the city.

Since Jessica enjoys the comforts of a privileged traveler, we understand as an audience that she will not be subject to any real danger present in the places she visits. For her, New Orleans remains a city that holds many friends and relatives, where the seedy underworld of jazz, voodoo, and carnival she seems so keen to exploit for her own writing does not touch her in any real way. She repeatedly proves that she is not only the consummate good guest and helpful interloper but also is incredibly adept at dipping into and out of worlds that are not hers at will. Part of this is the tropes of the cozy murder mystery at play, the middlebrow female detective story that allows audiences a form of escapism without any threat of emotional disruption or ambiguity. But a much larger part of Jessica's status as a tourist lies in the way television audiences are meant to digest the distinctive though at times stereotypical aspects of the places she visits. New Orleans is much more than a den for smugglers and drug dealers, backstabbing jazz musicians, voodoo doll-making old women, and people only interested in a good, gussied-up Mardi Gras party. But you have to visit New Orleans yourself to see that.

Notes

1 My close readings of two other episodes rife with Southern symbology—"Mourning Among the Wisteria" (1988) and "Ballad for a Blue Lady" (1990)—can be seen in: Burnett, Katharine A. and Miller, Monica Carol, editors. *The Tacky South*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022.
2 See for crime statistics for the city.
3 The song is quintessentially New Orleans, serving as its anthem. It was made famous by Louis Armstrong and then further popularized by Fats Domino and Al Hirt.

4 My attempts to find the real location of the Goula Ruins only returns results for the nineteenth-century Fort Macomb, the ruins of which were featured in season one of HBO's "True Detective" as Carcosa. There is also a town called Bayou Goula in Iberville Parish, just south of Baton Rouge. The ruins seem to be an invention for this episode. "Goula" is the Choctaw word of "river people."

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8 'Norman Rockwell-land' or 'Death Capital of Maine'?

Race, Social Status, and Parochialism as Factors in the Perceived 'Coziness' of Crime in Reagan-Era Cabot Cove

Allysha Powanda Winburn, Mark J. Winburn, and Cate E. Bird

Introduction

With a life that spanned nearly a century (b. 1894-d. 1978) and an artistic career that exceeded six decades, artist and illustrator Norman Rockwell was synonymous with the idyllic, late-twentieth-century, New-England-tinged brand of Americana that came to characterize the U.S. television crime drama *Murder, She Wrote*. While Rockwell's work during the 1960s delved into struggles related to the civil rights movement, his early work did not tackle deep-seated structural racial, economic, or sexual or gender inequities. Instead, the young Rockwell painted idealized portrayals of white Americana filled with nostalgia, humor, and hope. His earlier art reflected a cisgender, heteronormative, overwhelmingly white traditional idealism, and in re-presenting it (*sensu* Latour, 1987), reproduced and reified it within American culture. Perceived as lighthearted and optimistic, his earlier artwork served as a kind of beacon that even among the turmoil of world wars and economic depressions, all things would ultimately return to normal, and balance would ultimately be restored—albeit a balance tipped in favor of the status quo. This sense of balance, and the feelings of security and 'coziness' it produces, is echoed in *Murder, She Wrote*, which also depicts an idealized, whitewashed world in which disruptions—in this case, homicides and the processes that surround them (including processes of both investigation and grieving)—are resolved and the status quo restored.

The effect is that Cabot Cove, the fictional Maine town depicted in *Murder, She Wrote*, manages to function as both 'Norman Rockwell-land' and 'Death Capital of Maine,' maintaining its reputation as 'cozy' in spite of its overwhelming evidence of violence. We examine this coziness conundrum within its late-twentieth-century cultural context by rewatching each episode set in Cabot Cove, visually assessing its characters and scenarios, and noting: 1. demographics of homicide victims and perpetrators in Cabot Cove (i.e., perceived age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status); and 2. crime-scene

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recovery protocols employed by Cabot Cove Sheriff's Office personnel. We then compare these observations with the CDC data for the United States during the years 1984–1996 and protocols utilized by contemporary U.S. medicolegal agencies, in order to highlight disconnects that may inform an analysis of why violent crime in this fictional, Reagan-Era New England town engenders a sense of 'coziness' among viewers. We linger in the tension between the conflicting visions of Cabot Cove highlighted in our title as we explore sociodemographic factors influencing delusions of 'coziness' in the persistently and pervasively violent Cabot Cove.

Methods

Observational Analyses

We rewatched the 53 *Murder, She Wrote* episodes set in Cabot Cove, visually assessing all victims and perpetrators for demographic data, including perceived age category (coded as 'juvenile' or 'young,' 'middle,' or 'older' adult); perceived gender identity (coded as 'man' or 'woman' based on limited recognition of gender diversity in the 1980s–1990s); and perceived racial/ethnic identity (coded, for example, as 'white').

We also noted perceived socioeconomic status or SES of the victims and perpetrators, coded as 'lower,' 'low-middle,' 'middle,' 'middle-upper,' and 'upper' based on factors including occupations, attitudes, and possessions. For example, a 'lumber magnate' found dead in his estate surrounded by expensive possessions would be coded as 'upper' SES; his former employee, a convicted criminal driven to blackmail and depicted as wearing blue-collar attire, would be coded as 'lower.' Understood to reflect not only income or relative wealth but also a host of societally contingent cultural indicators, SES can be influenced by one's amount and kind of education, type and prestige of occupation, place of residence, and ethnic and religious background—all of which can be structured by social systems that create and perpetuate inequity (American Psychological Association, 2023; Reeves et al., 2018). Despite the limited nature of our observational analyses, we attempted to account for such contributors to SES; for example, the two perpetrators who externally embodied middle-class status were coded as 'middle' SES, despite having no remaining financial resources.

To undertake our gross-grained visual analysis of these fictional characters, we used both observational cues (e.g., biological variables, cultural indicators, languages, and accents as proxies for race/ethnicity; actor portrayals of dichotomous gender expressions as indicators of gender) and contextual cues (e.g., references to career, properties, and possessions informing an estimate of SES). We acknowledge the tautological nature of this analysis: in essence, we were making assumptions about characters based on the stereotypes their actors were depicting in order to convince the audience of these very demographics. However, as this analysis enables more substantive discussions of the

framing of these demographics by the television show and its audiences, we feel that it has relevance.

Finally, our analysis also noted whether victims and perpetrators were local or non-local to Cabot Cove; the relationships between victims and perpetrators; perpetrator motives; and victims' causes of death—typically, sharp-force trauma (i.e., traumatic impact with a fine-tipped, pointed or bladed implement like a knife, dagger, or letter opener), blunt-force trauma (i.e., traumatic impact from a larger and relatively slow-moving object like a paper weight, lamp, or frying pan), or gunshot trauma (i.e., high-velocity traumatic impact from a projectile).

Conceptualizations of 'motive' or why people perpetrate violent crimes can vary considerably amongst disciplinary and theoretical perspectives (e.g., psychology, criminology, jurisprudence). Using Parker and McKinley's (2018) *homicide event motive* framework, which conceptualizes homicide as a 'social event' and incorporates a perpetrator's interactions with victim(s) and situational aspects to understand the reasons homicide may have occurred, we classified motives of all 60 homicides in our Cabot Cove sample using the categories of *gain*, *jealousy*, *revenge*, *concealment*, *conviction/hate*, *thrill*, and *love*. An additional category of *self defense* was used in this study when homicides occurred as a result of a person defending themselves against physical attacks by the 'victim.'

In analyzing a television program explicitly and titularly focused on *Murder*, it is important to note the distinctions between 'homicide,' 'murder,' and' manslaughter,' which are not interchangeable terms. 'Homicide' is a medicolegal opinion rendered during death investigations and deemed to have occurred when death results from a volitional act committed by one person against another regardless of lawfulness or criminal intent (Hanzlick et al. 1993); homicides may be lawful (e.g., self-defense) or unlawful, and as such, perpetrators may or may not be charged judicially. 'Murder' is a legal opinion rendered in a court of law and represents the unlawful killing of another person taking into account intent and premeditation; perpetrators may be charged or convicted of murder in several different degrees, such as first-degree murder, second-degree murder, capital murder, and felony murder. Similar to murder, 'manslaughter' is a legal opinion rendered when a victim is killed without intent (recklessness, negligence, accident) but usually with some form of provocation; perpetrators may be charged or convicted of voluntary, involuntary, or vehicular manslaughter.

Our analysis only included homicides as defined from a medicolegal (not judicial) perspective; after all, viewers of the television program rarely see these cases go to trial. Our analysis included only homicides investigated by Jessica Fletcher and her associates; unsuccessful homicides or homicides that were committed in the decades prior to Jessica Fletcher's involvement in the investigatory proceedings were not considered. This led to a total sample of Cabot Cove 60 victims (Table 8.1) and 55 Cabot Cove perpetrators (Table 8.2), including eight cases in which multiple homicides were committed and three which involved more than one perpetrator.

Table 8.1 Demographic data for homicide victims in Cabot Cove, ME, investigated by Jessica Fletcher in Seasons 1-12 of *Murder, She Wrote* (n = 60).

Season/ episode	*Episode title*	*Name(s)*	*Gender*	*Race*	*Age*	*Local (Y/N)*	*SES*
1.1	Deadly Lady	Stephen Earl	Man	W	Older	N	Upper
1.6	Hit, Run and Homicide	Dean Merrill	Man	W	Mid	N	Upper
2.2	Joshua Peabody Died Here - Possibly	Henderson Wheatley	Man	W	Mid	N	Upper
2.10	Sticks and Stones	Beverly Gareth	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Upper
2.10	Sticks and Stones	Elvira Tree	Woman	W	Older	Y	Mid
2.14	Keep the Home Fries Burning	Betty Fiddler	Woman	W	Mid	N	Upper
2.18	If a Body Meet a Body	Henry Vernon	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
3.6	Dead Man's Gold	Alexandra Bell	Woman	W	Young	N	Mid
3.9	Obituary for a Dead Anchor	Doug Helman	Man	W	Mid	N	Upper
3.13	Crossed Up	Jedidiah L. Rogers	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
3.13	Crossed Up	Abel Gorsey	Man	W	Older	Y	Lower
3.17	Simon Says, Color Me Dead	Simon Thane	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
4.2	When Thieves Fall Out	Bill Hampton	Man	W	Mid	Y	Upper
4.7	If it's Thursday, it Must Be Beverly	Audrey Martin	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Mid
4.10	Indian Giver	Ad (Addison) Langley	Man	W	Mid	Y	Upper
4.12	Who Threw the Barbitals in Mrs. Fletcher's Chowder	Elmo Banner	Man	W	Older	N	Mid
4.18	Benedict Arnold Slipped Here	Benny Tibbles	Man	W	Older	Y	Mid
5.3	Mr. Penroy's Vacation	Clifford Colson	Man	W	Mid	N	Low-Mid
5.10	Weave a Tangled Web	Eric Bowman	Man	W	Mid	Y	Low-Mid
5.13	Fire Burn, Cauldron Bubble	Annie Gorman	Woman	W	Young	N	Lower
5.17	The Sins of Castle Cove	Miriam Harwood	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Mid
5.21	Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Part 1/2	Private Det. Capoletti	Man	W	Older	N	Low-Mid
6.2	Seal of the Confessional	Evan West	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
6.6	Dead Letter	Bud Fricksey	Man	W	Mid	Y	Low-Mid
6.11	Town Father	Anne Mitchell	Woman	W	Young	N	Lower
6.13	If the Shoe Fits	Jack Franson	Man	W	Mid	Y	Upper

(*Continued*)

Table 8.1 (Continued)

Season/ episode	*Episode title*	*Name(s)*	*Gender*	*Race*	*Age*	*Local (Y/N)*	*SES*
6.21	The Szechuan Dragon	Capt. Herbert Malachi	Man	W	Older	N	Mid
7.2	Deadly Misunderstanding	Ralph Maddox	Man	W	Mid	Y	Upper
7.6	A Body to Die For	Fred Keppard	Man	W	Older	N	Mid
7.13	Moving Violation	Brad Hellman	Man	W	Young	N	Upper
7.17	The Prodigal Father	Ned Jenks	Man	W	Older	Y	Lower
7.22	The Skinny According to Nick Cullhane	Nick Culhane	Man	W	Older	N	Mid-Upper
8.4	Thicker Than Water	Terry Montagne	Man	W	Older	Y	Mid-Upper
8.12	The Witch's Curse	Judge Willard Clinton	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
8.18	Programmed for Murder	Harriet Wooster	Woman	W	Young	Y	Mid-Upper
8.21	Badge of Honor	Mason Porter	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid-Upper
9.2	Family Secrets	Randy Sloan	Man	W	Young	Y	Mid
9.11	Final Curtain	Eric Benderson	Man	W	Mid	N	Mid-Upper
9.17	The Big Kill	Henry Riddett	Man	W	Older	Y	Lower
9.17	The Big Kill	Carl Ward	Man	W	Mid	N	Upper
9.22	Love's Deadly Desire	Marian King	Woman	W	Young	N	Mid
10.3	The Legacy of Borbey House	Laurel Perrin	Woman	W	Young	Y	Mid
10.3	The Legacy of Borbey House	Lawrence Baker	Man	W	Mid	Y	Upper
10.8	Love and Hate in Cabot Cove	Ethan Loomis	Man	W	Young	Y	Mid
10.14	Deadly Assets	Oscar Gandile	Man	W	Young	N	Lower
10.18	The Trouble with Seth	Leo Fender	Man	W	Older	N	Lower
10.21	Wheel of Death	Carl Dorner	Man	W	Mid	N	Mid
11.3	To Kill a Legend	Alexander Sandsby	Man	W	Older	N	Upper
11.3	To Kill a Legend	Amelia Farnham	Woman	W	Young	N	Mid
11.9	Murder by Twos	Sam Bryce	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
11.9	Murder by Twos	Terry Deauville	Woman	W	Young	Y	Unk
11.18	The Dream Team	Lorna Buffum	Woman	W	Mid	N	Upper
11.19	School for Murder	James Ryerson	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid-Upper
12.5	Home Care	Maggie Saunders	Woman	W	Older	Y	Upper
12.14	Murder in Tempo	Tommy Vaughn	Man	W	Young	N	Upper
12.19	Evidence of Malice	Leverett Boggs	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
12.19	Evidence of Malice	Fred Berrigan	Man	W	Mid	Y	Upper
12.21	Race to Death	Kyle Kimball	Man	W	Mid	N	Upper
12.22	What you Don't Know Can Kill You	Johnny	Man	W	Young	Y	Lower
12.22	What you Don't Know Can Kill You	Jeremy Woods	Man	W	Older	Y	Mid-Upper

Table 8.2 Demographic data for homicide perpetrators in Cabot Cove, ME, investigated by Jessica Fletcher in Seasons 1–12 of *Murder, She Wrote* (n = 55).

Season/ episode	*Episode title*	*Name(s)*	*Gender*	*Race*	*Age*	*Local (Y/N)*	*SES*
1.1	Deadly Lady	Maggie Earl	Woman	W	Young	N	Upper
1.6	Hit, Run and Homicide	Charles Woodley[a]	Man	W	Old	N	Mid
2.2	Joshua Peabody Died Here - Possibly	Dell Scott	Woman	W	Young	N	Upper
2.10	Sticks and Stones	Harry Pierce	Man	W	Old	Y	Mid-Upper
2.14	Keep the Home Fries Burning	Wilhemina Frasier	Woman	W	Mid	N	Upper
2.18	If a Body Meet a Body	Connie Vernon	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Upper
3.6	Dead Man's Gold	Susan Ainsley	Woman	W	Young	N	Mid
3.9	Obituary for a Dead Anchor	Nick Brody	Man	W	Old	N	Upper
3.13	Crossed Up	Dhody Rogers	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Upper
3.17	Simon Says, Color Me Dead	Carol Selby	Woman	W	Young	Y	Upper
4.2	When Thieves Fall Out	Kevin Cauldwell	Man	W	Old	Y	Mid
4.7	If it's Thursday, it Must Be Beverly	George	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
4.10	Indian Giver	Helen Langley[b]	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Upper
4.12	Who Threw the Barbitals in Mrs. Fletcher's Chowder	Kenny Oakes	Man	W	Mid	N	Mid
4.18	Benedict Arnold Slipped Here	Alastaire Andrews	Man	W	Mid	N	Upper
5.3	Mr. Penroy's Vacation	MaryLee 'Lee' Colson	Woman	W	Mid	N	Low-Mid
5.10	Weave a Tangled Web	'Frankie'	Man	W	Mid	Y	Lower
5.13	Fire Burn, Cauldron Bubble	Adam Frobisher	Man	W	Mid	Y	Lower
5.17	The Sins of Castle Cove	Ellis Holgate	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
5.21	Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Part 1/2	Bobby Shipton	Man	W	Young	N	Upper
6.2	Seal of the Confessional	Marilyn North	Woman	W	older	Y	Mid
6.6	Dead Letter	Stanley Holmes	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
6.11	Town Father	Winifred Thayer	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Upper
6.13	If the Shoe Fits	Danny Snow	Man	W	Mid	Y	Lower
6.21	The Szechuan Dragon	Stanley Lewis	Man	W	Young	Y	Low-Mid

(*Continued*)

Table 8.2 (Continued)

Season/ episode	*Episode title*	*Name(s)*	*Gender*	*Race*	*Age*	*Local (Y/N)*	*SES*
7.2	Deadly Misunderstanding	Rita Garrison	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Mid
7.6	A Body to Die For	Clarence La Rue	Man	W	Older	Y	Mid
7.13	Moving Violation	Meredith Hellman	Woman	W	Mid	N	Upper
7.17	The Prodigal Father	Elton Summers	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
7.22	The Skinny According to Nick Cullhane	Phil Mannix	Man	W	Older	N	Upper
8.4	Thicker Than Water	Zach Franklin	Man	W	Older	Y	Mid
8.12	The Witch's Curse	Lydia Winthrop	Woman	W	Older	Y	Upper
8.18	Programmed for Murder	Alan Wooster[c]	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid-Upper
8.21	Badge of Honor	Neal Dishman	Man	W	Older	Y	Upper
9.2	Family Secrets	Janet Weymouth	Woman	W	Young	Y	Upper
9.11	Final Curtain	David North	Man	W	Older	Y in youth	Upper
9.17	The Big Kill	Brian Bentall	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid-Upper
9.22	Love's Deadly Desire	Sibella Stone	Woman	W	Mid	N	Upper
10.3	The Legacy of Borbey House	Charles Weatherly	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
10.8	Love and Hate in Cabot Cove	Irene Macinoy	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Mid
10.14	Deadly Assets	Harvey Terhune	Man	W	Young	Y	Low or Mid
10.18	The Trouble with Seth	Connie Anderson	Woman	W	Young	Y	Mid
10.21	Wheel of Death	Richard Binyon	Man	W	Young	Y	Mid
11.3	To Kill a Legend	Nancy Godfrey	Woman	W	Young	Y	Mid
11.9	Murder by Twos	Al Wallace	Man	W	Man	Y	Mid
11.18	The Dream Team	Noah	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
11.19	School for Murder	Joey Mallo (as 'Irv Tripler')	Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
12.5	Home Care	Justin Haynes	Man	W	Young	Y	Upper
12.14	Murder in Tempo		Man	W	Mid	Y	Mid
12.19	Evidence of Malice	Meg Berrigan	Woman	W	Mid	Y	Upper
12.21	Race to Death	Jon Vanderveldt	Man	W	Young	N	Mid
12.22	What you Don't Know Can Kill You	Tom Sampson	Man	W	Older	Y	Mid

Notes

[a] Second perpetrator: Leslie Andler, a young, white, non-local woman of estimated-middle SES with money as a motivation and an unknown relationship with the victim.

[b] Second perpetrator: Tom Carpenter, a middle-aged, white, local man of upper SES who sought to cover up the crime of the primary perpetrator (his sister).

[c] Second perpetrator: Gretchen Price, a young, white, upper-status, non-local woman who was the lover of the primary perpetrator.

Contextual Comparisons: CDC Data and Modern Forensic Practices

For a comparative dataset of demographics from actual contemporary homicides, we examined the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics' table, 'Age-adjusted death rates for selected causes of death, by sex, race, and Hispanic origin: United States, selected years 1950-2018' (CDC 2019). We isolated homicide deaths for the years 1984 through 1996, the years during which *Murder, She Wrote* aired, generating average deaths-per-100,000 for gender and racial groups for the 12-year timeframe. For data on the frequencies of homicides within differing age groups, we utilized the CDC's 'Table LCODAge. Leading causes of death and number of deaths, by age: United States, 1980 and 2019' (CDC 2021).

For a comparative perspective on the crime-scene recovery and analysis protocols employed by Jessica Fletcher and her associates, we used disciplinary knowledge from forensic anthropology—the anthropological subdiscipline that applies expert knowledge of human skeletal and dental anatomy to the framework of death investigation—and the career field of two of our coauthors (APW, CEB). Forensic anthropologists use skeletal/dental expertise to answer questions of relevance to the medicolegal system—in the United States, the medical examiner and coroner (ME/C) system—typically concerning the identity of an unknown decedent or the interpretation of the circumstances of their death. Many forensic anthropologists in the United States are also archaeologically trained, which means that they play a valuable role in gathering evidence from and interpreting death scenes, enabling, essentially 'crime scene archaeology,' via systematic recovery of surface evidence and a scientific approach to the excavation of clandestine graves (Winburn and Tallman, 2023). Forensic anthropologists are also social scientists, students of humanity who are trained to observe and interact with the world holistically, exploring connections between human agents, social customs, and societal structures rather than examining each one in isolation. As such, perspectives from this discipline well-poise us to comment both on the technical aspects of death investigation and the broader sociocultural and systemic contexts for those deaths.

Results

Cabot Cove Victim Demographics and Contemporary CDC Context

Most Cabot Cove homicide *victims* were men (n = 45; 75%), and only 15 (25%) were women (see Table 8.1). Gender data from the CDC dating to the timeframe of the show's air dates are consistent with this 3:1 gender ratio in which men greatly outnumber women as homicide victims. Age-adjusted death-certificate data from the CDC show that between the years 1984 and 1996, U.S. men died of homicide, on average, 3.5x more frequently than women (13.5 versus 3.9 per 100,000 deaths).

Race data showed no such parity with the depiction of homicides in Cabot Cove. Specifically, all 60 of the 1984–1996 Cabot Cove homicide victims were white-passing. Age-adjusted data from the CDC show that during this same timeframe, individuals who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander died of homicide at similar rates to those who identified as white (4.8 versus 5.3 deaths per 100,000). However, individuals who identified as 'American Indian'/Alaska Native or Hispanic/Latino died of homicide over twice as frequently (10.8 and 14.2 deaths, respectively), and Black homicide deaths were disproportionately high, at 32.4 deaths per 100,000.

Most Cabot Cove homicide victims (77%) were either middle- or older-aged adults (n = 25 [42%] and 21 [35%], respectively); just 14 of the victims were younger adults (23%), and no Cabot Cove homicide victims were juveniles (i.e., infants, children, or young teenagers). These data deviate somewhat with the CDC data on leading causes of death for the relevant timeframe. Specifically, younger individuals are underrepresented in the Cabot Cove sample, and older adults are overrepresented. According to the CDC, homicide was the fifth most common cause of death for children 1–4 years old in the year 1980; for children 5–14 years old, it was fourth; and for adolescents/young adults between 15 and 24 years (overlapping our 'younger adult' category), it was the second leading cause of death. In the 1980 CDC dataset, relatively consistent with the Cabot Cove demographics, homicide remained common as the fourth leading cause of death for 'middle adults' between 25 and 44 years of age. Yet, after this age group, homicide dropped to #10 in 45 to 64-year-old adults and did not even appear in the top 10 for 'older' adults 65 years and older.

Additional demographic data beyond the information recorded in the CDC statistics were available for the fictional Cabot Cove victims, including residency status and estimated SES. In terms of residency, the sample of victims was roughly equally divided between local (n = 34; 57%) and non-local residents (n = 26; 43%). More than half of the Cabot Cove victims (n = 31; 52%) were estimated to be of upper or upper-middle SES; 16 were estimated to be middle SES (27%) and 12 lower or lower-middle SES (20%); the SES of one victim was coded as 'unknown.'

Cabot Cove Perpetrator Demographics, Motives, and Trauma Modalities

Observational and contextual assessment of the Cabot Cove episodes also enables a discussion of *perpetrator* demographics (see Table 8.2), motives, and trauma modalities that are not captured in CDC cause-of-death data (Table 8.3). All Cabot Cove perpetrators were white passing (n = 55). More were men (n = 33; 60%) than women (n = 22; 40%). Forty were local (73%) and only 15 non-local to Cabot Cove (27%). Most were middle-aged adults (n = 26; 47%); fewer were younger or older adults (n = 15 [27%] and 13 [24%], respectively), and none were children. Of the 55 perpetrators, nearly half (n = 26; 47%) were estimated to be of upper or middle-upper SES; 23

Table 8.3 Modalities, motives, and victim/perpetrator relationships for Cabot Cove homicides investigated by Jessica Fletcher, Seasons 1-12 of *Murder, She Wrote* (n = 60).

Season/ episode	*Title*	*Death modality*	*Motive*	*Victim/ perpetrator relationship*
1.1	Deadly Lady	GSW	Jealousy, Revenge	Father/daughter
1.6	Hit, Run and Homicide	BFT/MVA	Gain	Business partners
2.2	Joshua Peabody Died Here - Possibly	GSW	Revenge	Acquaintances
2.10	Sticks and Stones	Electrocution	Gain, Concealment	Acquaintances
2.10	Sticks and Stones	Hanging	Gain, Concealment	Acquaintances
2.14	Keep the Home Fries Burning	Poisoning	Jealousy	Best friends
2.18	If a Body Meet a Body	BFT	Gain, Concealment, Revenge	Husband/wife
3.6	Dead Man's Gold	BFT	Revenge	'colleagues'
3.9	Obituary for a Dead Anchor	Explosion (boat)	Gain	Producer/news anchor
3.13	Crossed Up	GSW	Gain	Father/daughter in law
3.13	Crossed Up	BFT	Gain, Concealment	Hired killer/ employer
3.17	Simon Says, Color Me Dead	SFT	Jealousy	Former lovers
4.2	When Thieves Fall Out	GSW	Gain	Coach and star footballer, being stalked by a man who was wrongfully accused of the murder the pair committed
4.7	If it's Thursday, it Must Be Beverly	GSW	Gain	Acquaintances
4.10	Indian Giver	SFT	Self defense	Husband/wife (brother-in-law accomplice mutilates the corpse)
4.12	Who Threw the Barbitals in Mrs. Fletcher's Chowder	Poisoning	Gain	Brothers-in-law

(*Continued*)

Table 8.3 (Continued)

Season/ episode	*Title*	*Death modality*	*Motive*	*Victim/ perpetrator relationship*
4.18	Benedict Arnold Slipped Here	BFT	Gain	Acquaintances
5.3	Mr. Penroy's Vacation	SFT	Gain	Husband/wife
5.10	Weave a Tangled Web	SFT	Gain	Acquaintances
5.13	Fire Burn, Cauldron Bubble	BFT	Gain	Fiancee of 'sister'
5.17	The Sins of Castle Cove	BFT	Revenge	Bookshop owner and client
5.21	Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Part ½	BFT	Gain	Jealous son (perpetrator) and private investigator following his father (victim)
6.2	Seal of the Confessional	SFT, BFT, Drowning	Self-defense, Revenge	Lovers (stabbing initiated by stepdaughter)
6.6	Dead Letter	BFT then asphyxiation (smoke)	Gain, Concealment	Acquaintances
6.11	Town Father	GSW	Jealousy	Perpetrator's husband was having affair with victim
6.13	If the Shoe Fits	BFT	Revenge	Acquaintances
6.21	The Szechuan Dragon	BFT	Gain	Strangers
7.2	Deadly Misunderstanding	SFT	Jealousy	Lovers
7.6	A Body to Die For	GSW	Jealousy	Husband and believed-to-be lover
7.13	Moving Violation	GSW	Gain	Stepmother/ stepson
7.17	The Prodigal Father	Strangulation	Gain	Former colleagues; blackmail relationship
7.22	The Skinny According to Nick Cullhane	GSW	Gain, Concealment	Acquaintances
8.4	Thicker Than Water	GSW	Gain	Business partners
8.12	The Witch's Curse	BFT	Jealousy, Revenge	Acquaintances/ business partners

(*Continued*)

Table 8.3 (Continued)

Season/ episode	*Title*	*Death modality*	*Motive*	*Victim/ perpetrator relationship*
8.18	Programmed for Murder	Poisoning	Jealousy	Husband/wife
8.21	Badge of Honor	BFT	Jealousy	Victim was having affair with perpetrator's wife
9.2	Family Secrets	BFT	Gain	Victim knew secrets about perpetrator's family
9.11	Final Curtain	BFT	Concealment	Blackmail relationship
9.17	The Big Kill	BFT / carbon monoxide poisoning	Gain	Business associates
9.17	The Big Kill	BFT / carbon monoxide poisoning	Gain	Business associates
9.22	Love's Deadly Desire	BFT	Revenge	Author/personal assistant
10.3	The Legacy of Borbey House	BFT	Jealousy, Revenge	Ex-fiancées
10.3	The Legacy of Borbey House	SFT	Concealment	Contractor and employer
10.8	Love and Hate in Cabot Cove	GSW	Jealousy	Perpetrator is mother of victim's rival
10.14	Deadly Assets	BFT	Gain	Strangers
10.18	The Trouble with Seth	SFT	To prevent assault	Perpetrator was in love with man targeted by the victim
10.21	Wheel of Death	SFT	Gain	Blackmailing carnival owner (victim) and antiques burglar (perpetrator)
11.3	To Kill a Legend	BFT	Gain, Concealment	Forger and person who hired him
11.3	To Kill a Legend	BFT	Concealment	Filmmakers
11.9	Murder by Twos	Electrocution	Gain	Blackmail relationship
11.9	Murder by Twos	Hanging	Jealousy	Unrequited love
11.18	The Dream Team	BFT/MVA/ drowning	Gain	Acquaintances

(*Continued*)

Table 8.3 (Continued)

Season/ episode	*Title*	*Death modality*	*Motive*	*Victim/ perpetrator relationship*
11.19	School for Murder	BFT	Concealment	Blackmail relationship
12.5	Home Care	Poisoning	Gain	Banker (perpetrator) who was swindling client (victim)
12.14	Murder in Tempo	Electrocution	Jealousy	Rocker victim's new girlfriend was perpetrator's unrequited love
12.19	Evidence of Malice	Strangulation	Gain	Wife of factory owner (perpetrator); employee (victim)
12.19	Evidence of Malice	BFT	Gain	Husband/wife
12.21	Race to Death	BFT	Revenge	Boat engineer and yachtsman
12.22	What you Don't Know Can Kill You	MVA	Revenge	Victim used to date perpetrator's daughter
12.22	What you Don't Know Can Kill You	SFT (Stabbing)	Concealment	Acquaintances

were of middle SES (42%), and six were estimated as lower or lower-middle SES (11%).

The majority of Cabot Cove perpetrators (53%) committed homicide for motives of gain (n = 32), with the motives of jealousy (n = 1), concealment (n = 12), and revenge (n = 12) represented at similar, considerably lower frequencies (20–22%). Self-defense (n = 2) and the instance in which homicide was committed 'to prevent assault' (n = 1) were infrequently represented (2–3%). Some Cabot Cove homicides were committed for multiple, overlapping motives (see Table 8.3), such as 'jealousy and revenge' or 'gain and concealment' (as such, the above frequencies total to over 100%). Notably, several of the motive categories proposed by Parker and McKinley (2018) were not represented in the Cabot Cove sample. Specifically, the motives of thrill, love, and conviction/hate—all of which could be described as motives of passion—were not observed.

Table 8.3 also presents relationships among Cabot Cove perpetrators and victims. Equal numbers of perpetrator-victim dyads were acquaintances or

colleagues/coworkers (n = 12; 20%). Family members were also relatively common relationships (n = 8; 13%), with spouses (n = 5) and fathers/children (n = 3) the most common familial relationships. Relationships, including lovers/former lovers (n = 4), strangers (n = 2), and best friends (n = 1), were less common (2–7%). Also shown in Table 8.3, the most common trauma modality in the sample was blunt trauma ('BFT'; n = 27), perpetuated with implements including household objects (e.g., paper weight, statuette, varnish can, lamp, frying pan), tools (e.g., shovel, hammer, wrench), and multiple times, pokers (n = 3) and pipes (n = 4). Gunshot trauma ('GSW') was seen in 11 cases, and sharp trauma ('SFT') in ten, with implements, including knives, daggers, letter openers, pitchforks, scissors, wooden stakes, and in two cases, antique weapons (see Table 8.3). Poisoning was also common (n=6 cases)—including toxins inhaled (e.g., carbon monoxide), consumed (e.g., atropine-contaminated strawberry jam), and taken intravenously. Other causes of death included manual or ligature strangulations (n = 4), electrocutions (n = 3), motor vehicle accidents ('MVA'; n = 3), drownings (n = 2), smoke inhalation, and boat explosion. In some cases, multiple modalities were noted in a single decedent (e.g., blunt trauma followed by drowning).

Discussion

Cabot Cove Homicides in Context

While majority-male gender demographics are consistent between Cabot Cove decedents and contemporary U.S. homicide victims, the exclusively white and majority middle-to-upper-class Cabot Cove decedents stand in stark contrast to the realities of homicide in the United States. Specifically, forensic casework disproportionately serves decedents with marginalized social identities. In inequitable societies like the United States (World Bank, 2023), access to basic rights like mental and physical healthcare, education, career opportunities, affordable housing, and nutritive food sources are systematically structured along social axes like race and class (Gravlee 2009; Han 2018; Holmes 2013; Marmot, 2004; Marmot and Bell, 2011; Sapolsky 2004). Structurally inequitable access to these resources produces disparities in health, disease, morbidity, and mortality, as the experience of living through social marginalization can lead to negative impacts on multiple body systems, including adrenal, cardiovascular, immune, neurological, skeletal, and reproductive (Calvin et al. 2003; Gravlee et al. 2005; MacDorman et al. 2016; Marmot 2005; McDade 2002; Mendenhall 2016; Moore and Kim, 2022; Sapolsky 2005; Walkup et al., 2023; Willen et al. 2017). Significantly, these disparities are reproduced not only in the U.S. criminal justice system (Lett et al., 2021; Rucker and Richeson, 2021) but also in the medicolegal system, where they contribute to an individual's likelihood of becoming a forensic case decedent (Moore and Kim, 2022; Winburn et al., 2022b), or ultimately, a cold case (Bird and Bird, 2022; Goad 2020; Winburn et al., 2022a).

In contrast with these medicolegal realities, both Cabot Cove victims and perpetrators are typically affluent, and always white. An analysis of Cabot Cove's perceived 'coziness' must thus consider a Reagan-era 'war on crime' sociocultural context in which whiteness and wealth were fetishized and other peoples and lifestyles were marginalized. The term of President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), which overlapped with *Murder, She Wrote* for 5 of its 12 seasons, was marked by extreme social and political conservatism in the United States. Though this time period has been characterized as a time of prosperity, the U.S. Gini Index actually increased through the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting a trend toward growing income inequality that continued in the subsequent decades (World Bank, 2023). Further, Reagan's much-lauded 'war on drugs' is now understood to have caused the targeted and disproportionate incarceration of U.S. citizens of color (cummings and Ramirez, 2021; 2022; Lucks, 2020), also constituting a war on non-U.S. persons in which migrants, particularly those from Latin America and the Caribbean, were criminalized (Stephens, 2021). Meanwhile, age-adjusted data indicate no actual reduction in crime during Reagan's 'war' (Steffensmeier and Harer, 1991), with fluctuations in violent crime rates linked with the legitimation of crime following periods of U.S. military actions (Bebber, 1994), and the Reagan-era rise in incarcerations instead resulting from the higher likelihood of being incarcerated given arrest during this timeframe (Boggess and Bound, 1993). Intentionally or not, the sanitized violent crimes depicted in *Murder, She Wrote* may have served as a form of distraction from other pressing public health and safety concerns occurring during the time of airing.

The racist and xenophobic climate of this era help to contextualize the attitudes of the fictional residents of Cabot Cove, particularly the fear of outsiders they often express. In Season 5, for example, one homicide perpetrator laments that, 'Cabot Cove hasn't been the same since the tourists started coming.' In Season 12, when Jessica Fletcher expresses incredulity about the possibility that a victim was robbed—'A mugging in Cabot Cove!?'—Sheriff Metzger replies, 'Well, we've been getting more and more drifters coming through here lately.' Also notable is the advent of Cabot Cove's one Indigenous American visitor—a young man whom Cabot Cove residents alternately fear, objectify, other, and subject to mob violence ('He saw us comin', and he fell down,' one mob participant provides; another adds, 'He fell down a lot!'). The anxiety of the residents—themselves almost entirely white—surrounding perceived outsiders—especially outsiders of color—reveals a thinly veiled milieu of xenophobia and racism which Fletcher, to her credit, often rails against. It is almost always in the context of outsider interactions that Cabot Cove residents express fear about their safety. In the context of their day-to-day lives, residents repeatedly refer to Cabot Cove's 'clean streets, fresh air, friendly people…but most of all, safe neighborhoods' where 'you can walk anywhere without feeling afraid.' They refer to their population-3,560 hamlet as a 'sleepy little town' where nothing ever happens—a 'jerkwater village where even the crickets die of boredom' with its only claim to fame that it 'leads the nation in per capita sales of live bait.'

In contrast with this idyllic portrayal of safe streets and friendly neighbors, our analysis shows that the vast majority of perpetrators, 73%, are themselves local. Far from resting on laurels of wealth and social privilege, the white and often-affluent Cabot Cove perpetrators frequently commit murder for motives of *gain* (e.g., money, inheritance, property, reputation), which must be viewed within the context of a hierarchical society with a steep social gradient. Income inequality has been identified as a major predictor of homicide (Blau and Blau, 1982; Daly 2017, 2023; Enamorado et al., 2016)—more so than factors like poverty or substance use—with research indicating that nearly half of the within- and between-country variance in homicide rates is explained by the Gini Coefficient (Szalavitz, 2018). Inequality-driven homicides tend to be perpetuated by males and driven by a sense of competition or perceived lack of respect (Daly, 2017; Szalavitz, 2018), and these indeed track with the demographics and motives of Cabot Cove perpetrators (see Tables 8.2 and 8.3), though the motives and modalities are far from cozy. Indeed, if Cabot Cove perpetrators are defined by their residency in this 'Norman Rockwell-land,' they are equally defined by their brutality. They take the lives of lovers, family members, strangers, colleagues, and rivals, without the 'passion' that might be interpreted to characterize motives like conviction, hate, and love, which are absent in this sample. Further, they frequently do so through the 'up-close-and-personal' modality of blunt-force trauma rather than modalities like poisoning or even gunshot trauma, which are arguably more abstract and less physically intimate. In light of this sobering mode-of-death data, Cabot Cove indeed seems—to quote Sheriff Metzger—more the 'death capital of Maine,' perhaps of the entire United States, than 'Norman Rockwell-land.'

Yet, with so many suspicious deaths occurring, it is interesting to note that suicides and accidents (e.g., overdoses) are never considered as possible manners of death for Cabot Cove victims. This omission seems particularly relevant in light of the crack-cocaine epidemic that occurred concurrently with the show's airing, the opioid epidemic that followed, and fact that the latter in particular has altered the mortality profile of small, New England towns like the fictional Cabot Cove (Stopka et al., 2019). While it is conceivable that contested cases like possible overdoses did exist in Cabot Cove but that we, the audience, were merely not brought into any death investigations that did not provide concrete evidence of homicide, this provides an interesting commentary on U.S. approaches to death and dying. A drama focusing on accidental overdose would almost undoubtedly have been considered too dark to air in the 1980s; yet a drama focusing entirely on homicides proved an enduring success. This disconnect is highlighted by the Season Four episode ('Who Threw the Barbitals in Mrs. Fletcher's Chowder') in which the victim, who struggled with substance abuse, was murdered by a covetous brother-in-law who chose to kill him rather than help him or otherwise continue to deal with the ramifications of his addiction. Whether taking the form of willful ignorance or outright criminalization, negative approaches to addiction also characterized the Reagan era, with disastrous effects on communities of color in particular (Reeves and Campbell, 1994).

An area in which Cabot Cove homicide statistics do seem to reflect a rosy, Norman Rockwell-like mythos is the lack of child and adolescent deaths. Cabot Cove victims (and perpetrators) tend to be middle-aged or older, in contrast with the fact that contemporary CDC data show homicide rates dropping off for the oldest adults, while remaining high for children, adolescents, and young adults. It could be argued that many of the older adults murdered in Cabot Cove, had they escaped their fate, might have died naturally of age-related diseases within the timeframe of the program's airing. Unlike in the darker crime shows that would later air—programs characterized by decidedly un-cozy approaches to homicide that focused directly on children, vulnerable peoples, and other 'special victims'—the homicides in *Murder, She Wrote* were, literally, rated 'G.' As Phyllis Betz notes in her chapter in this volume, sanitized depictions of murder, often tinged with nostalgia, are hallmarks of 'cozies.' This is certainly the case in the town of Cabot Cove, where each episode opens with what the English-language subtitles describe as 'cheerful orchestral music,' no one seemed to remain traumatized by previous murders, and we were never shown the pain, grief, or anguish of survivors. The message seems to be that there were no true tragedies in Cabot Cove, or perhaps that the murders that did occur created only a temporary imbalance, one that was restored once the murder was solved. It is also worth noting that Jessica Fletcher herself displays no signs of secondary trauma, despite her involvement in hundreds of homicide investigations over the course of a decade-plus. Even highly trained medicolegal personnel (e.g., forensic pathologists, forensic anthropologists, medicolegal death investigators) commonly report high levels of occupational stress and burnout, as well as dissatisfaction with professionally provided mental health resources (Goldstein and Alesbury, 2021). Fletcher, as an amateur sleuth, has neither a professional support system nor formal training in death investigation. To what does she owe her extraordinary resilience?

One component of her lack of emotional response to the trauma she repeatedly witnesses may be the attitude surrounding police work and death investigation that emphasizes the importance of being detached from and desensitized to one's casework. The idea that those involved in medicolegal death investigations can, and should, remain objective and unemotional in the face of the extremes of trauma, inequity, and injustice that they witness was common in the United States at the time of the show's airing; and it remains surprisingly common today, even in our relatively more mental-health and social-justice-conscious society (Bird and Bird, 2022; Winburn and Clemmons, 2021a). As one experienced forensic caseworker stated in a recent survey conducted by a team of cultural and forensic anthropologists:

> I cry in the shower all the time. But my feelings cannot be allowed to influence my findings…My report does not accuse anyone—it simply documents what was done to a particular victim. And when I am in court, I am presenting my findings in an objective manner with facts and technical expertise, not emotion.
>
> (Marten et al., 2023:591).

The problems with this approach are not only that humans are incapable of true objectivity, nor that maintaining a fictional veneer of stoicism can mask underlying mental-health issues and allow them to fester, but also that remaining neutral and maintaining the status quo in the face of injustice is itself taking a subjective stance (Rodríguez Almada et al., 2021; Winburn and Clemmons, 2021a;b). In forensic anthropology and the broader forensic sciences, the debate over whether compassion, empathy, emotion, and social-justice advocacy have roles in forensic casework is ongoing (Marten et al., 2023).

Another component of Fletcher's detached approach to traumatic death may relate to the veiled misogyny at work in Cabot Cove (Freier, this volume). As Mary Freier notes in her chapter in the current volume, Fletcher walks a cheery and unruffled line in her interactions with her predominantly male friends and colleagues, distancing herself from such polarizing traits as shrewishness, strength, or sexuality, in contrast with the other, typically one-dimensional female residents of Cabot Cove—Audrey Martin, Adele Metzger, and Eve Simpson, respectively—who embody such traits. In order to navigate the patriarchal system of Cabot Cove death investigations, it might be argued that Fletcher does not have the luxury of expressing such traits, including, perhaps, overt displays of emotion over death.

Parochialism in Cabot Cove Death Investigation

Finally, we wish to highlight the parochialism inherent in Cabot Cove's approach to medicolegal death investigation for homicides, from securing and processing crime scenes, to postmortem analyses of victims, to maintaining chain of custody. Law enforcement agents responsible for responding to crime scenes in Cabot Cove are frequently depicted as non-experts, bumbling their way through their on-scene responsibilities. This is perhaps best characterized by Sheriff Amos Tupper's actions toward death scenes and decedents, including his assessment of a clandestine grave in Season 2 ('It ain't no gopher hole, I can tell ya that much') and his Season 4 warning to be 'careful' with a decedent, as 'it's not a sack of potatoes you got there.' Furthermore, Jessica Fletcher's intimate involvement at homicide scenes—including handling evidence—are rarely questioned, despite that these represent overt instances where the chain of custody is broken, and the investigative team would run the risk of any collected evidence being ruled as inadmissible in subsequent legal proceedings.

The Cabot Cove death investigation team typically includes merely Metzger and Fletcher, occasionally includes Deputies Broom and Floyd, and never includes personnel from any medical examiner/coroner (ME/C) offices—even though in most contemporary U.S. jurisdictions, the investigation of any potential crime scene including human remains was mandated to involve ME/C representatives. This procedural incongruity is only highlighted by the fact that the Cabot Cove team members occasionally make references to the various agencies with which they should, hypothetically, be collaborating. Fletcher references 'the County Medical Examiner' in one Season 8 episode; the 'State

Police' are mentioned as the laboratory that runs trace evidence in Season 10; and later in that season, the 'forensics people' are referenced.

That these external experts are never realized is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of increasing standardization in death investigation specifically and the forensic sciences more broadly. In addition to their increasing reliance on technologies like the comparative analysis of nuclear and mitochondrial DNA, forensic scientists were actively developing reference standards during this timeframe. Standardization of analytical methods became a particular focus after the 1993 Daubert versus Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals court decision codified the need for the methods used in expert-witness testimony to be validated and peer-reviewed. This means that, particularly by the end of the show's run, Cabot Cove represented a mid-century holdover, defying not only local- and state-level conventions for crime-scene recovery but also federal standards for human-remains interpretation in favor of a less-codified, more-individualistic, amateur approach to death investigation. Yet, however amateur these investigations are, they are also inevitably resolved. The implication seems to be that Cabot Cove can take care of itself: with the help of Jessica Fletcher, all homicides can be solved, confessions neatly obtained, and order restored. In reality, however, the television series evidences no such order. Cabot Cove does not become safer with increased application of these Fletcherian investigative protocols; rather, annual homicide numbers remain consistent (increasing from two in Season 1 to range between four and seven in Seasons 2–12; mean = 5; median = 5), and instances of multi-victim homicides actually increase over time. The first six seasons evidence just two cases in which a perpetrator or perpetrators murdered multiple decedents; in the second six seasons, there were six such cases, and they became particularly common in Seasons 11 and 12, each of which saw two multiple-decedent cases (see Tables 8.1 and 8.3).

One might argue for increasing our suspension of disbelief for *Murder, She Wrote*'s parochial style of medicolegal death investigation. Yet, as the 'CSI Effect' (Schweitzer and Saks, 2007) has taught the forensic science community, inaccurate popular-media depictions of forensic science can produce unrealistic expectations in real forensic cases and (wrongly) shape the public's knowledge of forensic processes, particularly of technological capabilities (Shelton, 2008). Further, as analyses of both Reagan-Era and subsequent media coverage showcase, televised attitudes towards crime, criminality, and morality—typically racialized and racist—can craft and perpetuate negative stereotypes, further social stigma, and justify structural and physical violence against affected populations in ways that have devastating real-life consequences (Adamson, 2016; Littlefield, 2008; Reeves and Campbell, 1994).

Conclusions

Beyond *Murder, She Wrote*, media audiences—particularly, though not exclusively, in Western societies—continue to be fascinated with fictional and

non-fictional tales of homicide in general, and murder in particular. From dinner-party murder mysteries to true-crime themes in movies, television, and most recently, podcasts (Green and Michael-Fox, 2023; Sherrill, 2022), the public eagerly consumes digestible, neat stories of the macabre. Yet, an analysis of *Murder, She Wrote*'s enduring appeal must consider its specific, Reagan-era sociocultural context, in which a racialized 'war on drugs' criminalized and othered substance users, people with addictions, and particularly people of color to advance a reactionary agenda that portrayed social and structural determinants of health and wellbeing as individual problems that could be solved if you 'just say no' (Reeves and Campbell, 1994). It is in this sociocultural context that the perceived 'coziness' of Cabot Cove makes sense—a context in which whiteness and wealth were fetishized to the point where the extreme violence enacted by privileged, fictional Mainers on friends, lovers, neighbors, and strangers became normalized as 'cozy crime.' In this chapter, we linger in the tension between the conflicting visions of Cabot Cove highlighted in our title as we explore sociodemographic factors influencing delusions of 'coziness' in the persistently and pervasively violent Cabot Cove.

Ultimately, these visions prove unexpectedly complimentary, as they highlight not only the tension within Rockwell's actual body of work but also within the conservative United States of Reagan's era, in which a xenophobic preoccupation with crime was partially assuaged by a superficial approach to incarceration that only seemed to resolve an underlying social disorder. Reagan-era audiences accepted this version of reality as comforting and cheerful—'cozy'—and audiences continue to accept it, we argue, because it remains easier to digest a narrative portraying the neat and tidy resolution of isolated, individualistic crimes within an idyllic, nostalgia-tinged community than to engage with the deeper, social, and structural forces that explain patterns of violence, poverty, and mortality in the United States, and which have not been resolved in the years since the show's airing.

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9 From *Murder, She Wrote* to *La Signora in Giallo*

Jessica Fletcher as a Pop Culture Icon in Italy

Lucia Casiraghi and Nicolò Salmaso

Introduction

Originally broadcast in Italy from June 1, 1988, to April 9, 1997, by the state-owned channel RAI 1, *Murder, She Wrote* rapidly became one of the most successful and iconic television shows in the country. Since its original prime time broadcast, reruns have continued to air and continue today at a specific time slot, Monday–Friday at 1 pm (lunchtime for most Italians), winning over even the newest generations of viewers. In particular and remarkably all this while, the character of Jessica Fletcher has been a real pop culture icon in a country that is culturally very distant from the United States.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the cultural impact *La Signora in Giallo*[1] (the Italian title of the show) has had and the reasons for its ongoing success in Italy. Our approach will be multifaceted and will include, first of all, an in-depth study of the Italian adaptation and dubbing procedure of the show. In particular, we highlight how, through the adaptation and dubbing process of a foreign television program, the original linguistic and cultural contents and meanings have to be slightly changed in order to be more understandable by the target audience. Therefore, the Italian version of *Murder, She Wrote* also exemplifies how some of the most successful American television series, which are broadcast all around the world, are somewhat changed in translation before they even reach their intended foreign target audience, the Italian one in this case, "so that their impact [is] already quite different that if the viewers had seen the original program in English" (Ferrari 2010: x).

Finally, we critically address the paratextual elements that have grown more recently around the show, focusing on the presence of Jessica Fletcher on Italian social media and, in particular, in Internet memes. From our analysis of these elements, not only do some of the distinctive traits and qualities (e.g. gender, age, cleverness, and fashion sense) of the iconic character emerge, but a mix of the typically American background of the series and some culturally specific references to superstition more characteristic, if stereotypically, of Italian culture can be detected. The playful combination of global and local elements is also visible in the linguistic traits of the content that we analyzed. Starting from the definition of memes as a social activity not only aimed at

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entertaining, but also at expressing identities and creating bonds, we argue that the iconic status of the show and the presence of Jessica Fletcher in Italian pop culture, as reflected on the content shared on social media, is in part attributable to its audience's feelings of nostalgia for a past that has faded away. Ultimately, this chapter shows how, by crossing borders between television and the Internet, *La Signora in Giallo* ties two different media and eras together.

Domesticating Jessica Fletcher

From the early days of sound film, dubbing[2] has always been the most used audiovisual translation (ATV) method in Italy. This translation mode, also defined as adaptation, consists in "replacing the original voice track with the voices of dubbing actors speaking in the TL [target language], recreating the delivery pace of the original voices and synchronizing the TL voice track with the lip movements of the characters on screen" (Palumbo 2009: 39). This process involves three main phases:

1 Literal translation of the source material and subsequent adaptation for the screen completed by a team of translators[3] (*traduttori*) and dialogue writers (*dialoghisti*) (AntonioGenna.net 2024);
2 The recording of new dialogue in the target language performed by voice actors (*doppiatori*) assisted by dubbing directors (*direttori del doppiaggio*) in the dubbing studios;
3 Synchronization of the new dialogue into the source material carried out by synch assistants (*sincronizzatori*).

Generally speaking, the assessment on the outcome of a dubbed version is very subjective because, for several reasons, this kind of interlingual mediation can never entail a faithful translation of the source text (movie, television show, documentary, etc.). This is why, in a certain sense, we can consider dubbing as a creative process. Translators and dialogue writers have to often resort to their own creativity in order to adapt the source text to the target culture, actually moving away from its original meaning. Therefore, the new text that is created for the target culture can contain different interpretations according to the translation strategies that are adopted and transmit something dissimilar from the source text. In particular, "[d]ubbing allows texts to become culturally and nationally specific, not only reconfiguring 'myths' for the new audiences in a new context, but also recounting such myths in the very language (including accents, dialects, and regional expressions) of those audiences" (Ferrari 2010: 46–47).

The Italian version of *Murder, She Wrote* is generally deemed as a good adaptation of its source material and is certainly one of the aspects that contributed the most in cementing the image of Jessica Fletcher in the Italian collective imagination. The show originally aired in Italy between 1988 and

1997, a period during which the majority of Italians had limited exposure to the English language[4] and American television seriality was a relatively recent import on Italian television. In fact, American television shows began to be regularly broadcast on Italian television only from the end of the 1970s mainly to fill the empty schedules of newly established private channels[5] (Monteleone 2021: 407).

In order to better understand some of the translation strategies that made an American product such as *Murder, She Wrote* so appealing to the Italian audience, we decided to carry out an analysis of *La Signora in Giallo*, its Italian dubbed version. To this end, we narrowed our focus to two episodes: "If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly[6]," Season 4, Episode 7 (Italian title: "*Beverly di giovedì*[7]") and "The Sins of Castle Cove[8]," Season 5, Episode 17 (Italian title: "*I peccati di Castle Cove*[9]"). We chose these two episodes in particular because they undoubtedly contributed to the creation of the storyworld of Cabot Cove, Maine, one of the most iconic features of the show. Furthermore, since they feature recurring characters, they can also be revealing of some translation practices implemented by Italian translators and dialogue writers.

The plots of these two installments revolve around Loretta's Beauty Shop, a beauty parlor owned by Loretta Spiegel, where the women of Cabot Cove meet to gossip and have their hair and nails done. In "If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly," Deputy Jonathan Martin's wife Audrey is found dead in her kitchen with a gun in her hand. Both Sheriff Tupper and Jessica discount suicide and find out that Jonathan has long been in relationships with many ladies of Cabot Cove, including Eve Simpson, Phyllis Grant, Ideal Molloy, and even Beverly Hills, Dr. Hazlitt's nurse. To each of them Jonathan dedicates a day of the week, without the others knowing. When the story becomes public knowledge, scandal erupts. In "The Sins of Castle Cove," instead, Sybil Reed, one of Jessica's former students when she taught in Cabot Cove, has become a successful writer after the publication of a novel in which she included all the local secrets and gossip. *The Sins of Castle Cove* also deals with the murder of a cheating housewife killed by her jealous husband. When Miriam Harwood is found dead in ways similar to those described in Sybil's book, Jessica offers her help to Sheriff Metzger in finding the culprit.

These episodes are particularly interesting because, through strong supporting female characters, they also portray instances of what Media Studies scholar Myrna A. Hant defines as emotional aging, which incorporates a sexual self in which love, growth, and transformation can exist (2014: 9). In fact, through media representations of satisfying sexual and emotional lives, older women are finally perceived as powerful and in control (Hant 2014: 6). Moreover, these portrayals not only help mature women to be hopeful about this stage in life but also allow young people as well to look forward to a time of new possibilities and opportunities filled with increased agency and renewed activism (Hant 2014: 17). This is particularly interesting when such concepts

are visually shown through television to an audience, such as the Italian one, which is largely made up of an aging population. We should not forget that Italy is a country with a low birth rate and where life expectancy is always on the rise[10]. Moreover, it is also a nation that is still heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. It was therefore interesting to analyze how the explicit themes of aging and sexuality in these two episodes were adapted in the Italian version of the show. In a certain sense, we can state that, as we will see, some conservative approaches in Italian dubbing have slightly inhibited the exploration of emotional aging by inserting moral judgments that were not present in the original screenplays.

The most prominent aspect that emerged from our analysis of the Italian dubbing of these two episodes is that explicit references to the sex life of Cabot Cove's female senior citizens have been generally toned down and softened by Italian translators and dialogue writers. The following examples are taken from "If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly." In one of the climactic sequences, Beverly Hills reveals to Jessica, Sheriff Tupper, and Dr. Hazlitt that she has been in a relationship with Deputy Martin with a fairly straightforward statement:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Hills: It was good clean sex once a week.	Hills: *Era un dolce incontro di sesso tutte le settimane.*	Hills: It was a sweet sexual encounter every week.

The concept of sweetness, completely absent in the original version, attenuates the frankness of the elderly nurse's statement. A veiled romanticism is also introduced, which puts this relationship in a more acceptable and normative light for elderly Italian viewers. From the subsequent exchanges between the characters, we can infer that, in the Italian version, Hills, betraying the intent of the original screenwriters[11], is in fact in love with Deputy Martin. The link between the two is therefore legitimized by translators and dialogue writers through a feeling that is actually absent in the original version. At another point in the episode, Sheriff Tupper, visibly not at ease, questions Deputy Martin about his alleged relationship with Loretta Spiegel:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Tupper: Jonathan, I need to know the truth now, and I mean the whole truth. Did you ever have a … a date with Loretta?	Tupper: *Jonathan, devi tirar fuori la verità e intendo dire tutta la verità. Hai mai avuto un … un incontro con Loretta?*	Tupper: Jonathan, you have to get the truth out, and I mean the whole truth. Have you ever had a … a meeting with Loretta?

The word "date" should be translated into Italian as "*appuntamento*" but, in this case, the more neutral "*incontro*" ("meeting") was adopted, once again, in an attempt to soften the non-normative implications of the encounters between the ladies of Cabot Cove with Martin. In particular, the word "*incontro*" takes away any romantic or sexual (but even friendly) connotation and places the action of the two people meeting in a quasi-business or professional context. A similar translation strategy is employed when Jessica points out to Sheriff Tupper and Dr. Hazlitt that her friends at the beauty parlor are perhaps looking for relationships of companionship:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Fletcher: But, you know, sex itself seems to have had less to do with it than companionship.	Fletcher: *Non mi pare che il sesso sia il vero centro motore di questa vicenda, credo, invece, l'amicizia.*	Fletcher: It doesn't seem to me that sex is the real driving force of this affair, I believe, instead, that friendship could be it.

Once more, the normativity of a friendship feeling can distance these aging female characters from any negative assessment by the more conservative slice of the elderly Italian audience.

In our sample, we also observed that there are some instances in which the moral judgment of a character on another is more stressed in the dubbed version. For example, in the same episode, when Sheriff Tupper wants to convince Jessica that Deputy Martin actually killed his wife:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Tupper: No, Mrs. Fletcher, he [Deputy Martin] is surely as guilty as that Bluebeard fella. And if he thinks he can get away with this kind of a murder …	Tupper: *Mi dispiace è lui l'assassino! Questa specie di Barbablù! Ma se credeva che uccidendo la moglie …*	Tupper: I'm sorry, he's the murderer! This sort of Bluebeard! But if he believed that by killing his wife …
Fletcher: Amos.	Fletcher: *Amos.*	Fletcher: Amos.
Tupper: And these kind of adventures, well, he's got another thing coming.	Tupper: *Poteva continuare a fare il galletto con quelle altre due sciagurate* [Phyllis Grant and Eve Simpson]*, si è sbagliato di grosso e glielo assicuro!*	Tupper: He could continue to be cocky with those other two wretches [Phyllis Grant and Eve Simpson], he was very wrong and I assure you!

In the Italian version, introducing useless pieces of information not present in the original one, Tupper deems Phyllis Grant and Eve Simpson unfortunate

to have anything to do with Martin. Behind Tupper's Italian words, there is also the underlying moral lesson that women of a certain age should not get involved in romantic relationships. A similar translation attitude can also be found in "The Sins of Castle Cove[12]." In a sequence, for example, Jessica asks Sybil Reed why she wrote such novel:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Fletcher: No. I'm wondering why you did write it. A book so filled with dark themes and unhappy people.	Fletcher: *Infatti, mi domandavo cosa ti avesse spinto a scrivere un libro di sofferte ambiguità, di tradimenti, di persone infelici.*	Fletcher: Indeed, I was wondering what prompted you to write a book of painful ambiguities, of betrayals, of unhappy people.

Again, the Italian audience is confronted with more information as opposed to the original version. It is Jessica's judgment, which by extension also applies to her fellow townspeople of Cabot Cove, that the ambiguities of the citizens of Castle Cove described in the novel are suffered.

Another translation trend that we noticed in the dubbed version is the lower presence of taboo language. Generally speaking, Italian tends both to under-translate such words and insert fewer than occur in the original (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000). An example is offered by a conversation between Jessica and Eve Simpson after the publication of Reed's *The Sins of Castle Cove*:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Simpson: This ambitious little hussy [Sybil Reed], whom you so carelessly inspired.	Simpson: *È solo un'ambiziosa spudorata ragazzina che si ispira a te, dice.*	Simpson: She's just an ambitious, shameless little girl looking up to you, she says.
Fletcher: Oh, now wait a minute, Eve.	Fletcher: *No, no, aspetta un attimo.*	Fletcher: No, no, wait a minute.
Simpson: The little witch should have her mind washed out with soap.	Simpson: *È una strega, bisognerebbe lavarle quello sporco cervello.*	Simpson: She's a witch, her dirty brain should be washed.

The derogatory term with which Simpson describes Reed is replaced with a circumlocution in Italian ("*spudorata ragazzina*") that has, in any case, less negative connotation than in the original version.

Another important feature that can be detected, not only on *La Signora in Giallo* but also in the realm of Italian dubbing in general, is the insertion of arbitrary references to Italian culture to make the dubbed product more accessible to the Italian public. In this regard, Media Studies scholar Chiara

Francesca Ferrari recalls her experience with dubbed television growing up in Italy:

> I did not question why television, in particular, seemed to offer stories of and about the United States that resonated with my own perception of life, culture, and society. I was pleased to realize that American writers would often choose Italian names for their characters, or mention aspects of Italian history and culture in their plots, or represent aspects of life among Italian immigrants in the United States
>
> (2010: 1)

All the references to Italian names, culture, and history were actually created and added *in translation* by dubbing professionals looking for ways to domesticate American television for Italian audiences (Ferrari 2010: 2). As stated earlier, even though highly connotated in its American background and settings, there are some instances of this practice also in the dubbed version of *Murder, She Wrote*. For example, in the Italian version of "The Sins of Castle Cove," Loretta claims to have eaten pizza with the mother of her assistant Coreen Wilson:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Spiegel: Your mom looked fine an hour ago... when we took our aerobics class.	Spiegel: *La tua mamma sta benone. Un'ora fa, dopo la lezione di aerobica, ci siamo fatte una pizza.*	Spiegel: Your mom is fine. An hour ago, after our aerobics class, we had pizza together.

In "If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly," instead, Eve Simpson mentions the veneration of saints, something culturally specific to Roman Catholicism and not to the more widespread Protestantism in the United States, while referring to the recently deceased Audrey Martin during a conversation at Loretta's beauty parlor:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Simpson: When you go to that great coffee klatch in the sky, you want to look your best.	Simpson: *Quando accetti l'invito a un party fra i santi vorrai fare la tua figuretta.*	When you accept an invitation to the party of saints, you want to make a good impression.

We conclude our analysis by pointing out some interesting translation inaccuracies in the two episodes. First of all, the name of the character of Cabot Cove housewife Ideal Molloy has been wrongly translated as Ideal Mallory

(the original mistake was kept in subsequent episodes). Moreover, there is a specific instance in "If It's Thursday, It Must Be Beverly" in which both the translator and dialogue writer must have misinterpreted the original text:

Original version	*Dubbed version*	*Literal translation*
Tupper: And I distinctly remember I asked her [Ideal Molloy] to the picture show last Monday. She said she had to wash her hair.	Tupper: *Lunedì scorso gli* [Deputy Martin] *ho chiesto di sostituirmi perché volevo andare al cinema. No! Si doveva lavare la testa!*	Tupper: Last Monday, I asked him [Deputy Martin] to fill in because I wanted to go to the movies. No! He had to wash his head!

This small translation error makes the scene incomprehensible to the Italian viewer because the reference to washing one's head/hair does not function with Martin's character, even from a purely visual point of view (we never saw Martin inside Loretta's Beauty Shop throughout the whole episode). A similar mistake can be found in "The Sins of Castle Cove" where the word "geek," used as a nickname to describe one of the characters in Sybil Reed's scandalous novel[13], has been incomprehensibly translated as "*geco*" ("gecko"). Even though the strategy works from the point of view of matching the movement of the lips of the characters when switching from English to Italian, it makes Jessica's epiphany regarding the murderer at the end of the episode incomprehensible to the Italian public. In fact, Ellis Holgate, Cabot Cove's bookstore owner, can be characterized as being a geek but certainly not as a gecko.

To conclude, *La Signora in Giallo*, the Italian adaptation of *Murder, She Wrote*, proved to be as successful and iconic because it presented its viewer with something that they were not familiar with, such as life in small-town America. However, the dubbing procedure functioned as a sort of security blanket that allowed the Italian public to deal with what we could define as a culture-specific rewriting of some of the show's most controversial and difficult to understand elements. The talent of Jessica Fletcher's Italian voice actress Alina Moradei[14] (1928–2016) also certainly contributed to the ongoing success of the show in the country (Marco Bonardelli 2007). A real-life meeting between Moradei and Angela Lansbury occurred at the *Gran Premio Internazionale dello Spettacolo* (International Grand Prix for the Performing Arts) on May 4, 1999[15], when Lansbury was awarded a *Telegatto*[16] (Telecat) for *Murder, She Wrote*, winner of the best foreign television show of the year (Matteo Scarpellini 2021). After being asked by presenter Milly Carlucci if she liked her Italian voice, Lansbury publicly praised the acting qualities of her Italian colleague:

Carlucci: What do you think about her voice?
Lansbury: Very interesting … very close to my voice! […] I'm very happy that such a lovely actress is playing my voice in the series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdOF9DlNcJU)

Moreover, while being interviewed by presenters Carlucci and Pippo Baudo, there was even a small misunderstanding about the ties between Lansbury and Italy (Gran Premio Internazionale dello Spettacolo 1999):

Carlucci: *Ma lo sai Pippo che la signora ha parenti in Italia?* (Pippo, did you know that the lady has relatives here in Italy?)
Baudo: *Ah sì?* (Really?)
Carlucci: Do you have relatives here in Italy?
Lansbury: Yes, my daughter is married to a young man from a Neapolitan family.
Carlucci: *Sua figlia è sposata a Napoli.* (Her daughter is married and lives in Naples.)
Lansbury: Yes, *Napoli.*
Carlucci: *Vuole salutare la figlia che sta a Napoli?* (Would you like to say hello to your daughter who lives in Naples?)
Lanbsury: *Alla famiglia Battara. Ad Antonietta, Gino, Clelia, Stefano, Francesca* … [speaking Neapolitan] *stateme boni!* (To the Battara family. To Antonietta, Gino, Clelia, Stefano, Francesca … take care!) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdOF9DlNcJU)

Carlucci's small translation mistake concerning Lansbury's daughter living in Naples allowed the actress to express herself in almost perfect Italian and even in Neapolitan. Lansbury went on to thank the public who made the television show a hit on Italian television screens.

Despite the inaccuracies of its Italian version, also thanks to Lansbury's *Telegatto* appearance, *Murder, She Wrote*, and above all the character of Jessica Fletcher, successfully entered the Italian popular culture imagination. When Lansbury passed away on October 11, 2022, a special bumper ("*Arrivederci, cara Signora Fletcher!*"/"Goodbye, dear Mrs. Fletcher!," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFV7DyyL99U) was even broadcast on Rete 4, the channel that was airing *Murder, She Wrote* reruns at the time, further acknowledging a solid and uninterrupted relationship between the actress, her iconic character, and the Italian audience that had existed for more than thirty years (Rete 4 2022).

Who's Dead? *La Signora in Giallo* in Italian Memes

The long-lasting success of *La Signora in Giallo* as a popular culture icon in Italy is not limited to the realm of television. In the past few years, the character of Jessica Fletcher has found a special place on Italian social media, where she appears in a variety of contexts and formats, from pictures to videos and gifs. In this section, we will explore part of the online content dedicated to *La Signora in Giallo*, focusing on Internet memes, to analyze how and why the Italian adaptation of the series has crossed the borders of television, and what forms it has taken in the environment of digital entertainment.

Memes as a Form of Participatory Culture

Before we delve into our analysis of the presence of *Murder, She Wrote* in the Italian social media landscape, we would like to briefly introduce the main concepts that we will deal with. The first one is the concept of "participatory culture." In the book *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins defines participatory culture as one with "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices." It is also a culture where "members believe that their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins 2009: 5–6). This definition has proved to be a useful compass to understand Internet culture and its products as we know them today. In the past few decades, advances in technologies and their availability to a broader public have created a media environment in which potentially anyone[17] has the opportunities, skills, and tools to create content and information. In the digital world, and especially on social media, people are both consumers and producers[18] of the textual and audiovisual content that circulates online. This has led to new forms of civic engagement and creative expression that have affected communities of Internet users in different ways. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on a specific expression of participatory culture, that is, online fandom communities. Built around a shared interest in a variety of popular culture products, fandoms have become a visible and meaningful presence in today's media environment (see Booth, 2018). On social media platforms, members of these affiliations engage in the creation and diffusion of materials dedicated to their favorite games, films, television series, etc. The content that they produce is not limited to the replication of already existing characters, scenes, and plots. Indeed, fans often creatively interact with the source, generating fanfiction and other original mash-ups, often in the form of memes[19].

The concept of Internet meme is closely related to the idea of participatory culture. In Shifman's words, "user-driven imitation and remix have become highly valued pillars of contemporary participatory culture, to the extent that one may argue that we live in an era driven by a hyper-memetic logic" (Shifman, 2013a: 365). But what is an Internet meme, where does it come from, and why is it so relevant in today's popular culture? The origin of the term "meme" dates back to 1976, when the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene*. In his book, he defined the idea of "meme"[20] as a replicator that spreads ideas, information, and behaviors in human cultures. This process is made possible by "social selection and ideology fitness," which parallel what genes do "through sexual selection and physical fitness" (McCulloch 2019: 239). What we mean today with "internet memes," however, is only partially related to Dawkins' definition. In the field of Internet studies, "memes are treated as media objects with particular characteristics and associated practices instead of self-propelling ideas" (Miltner 2017: 413)[21] . In this context, memes

are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (Shifman 2013a: 367). Meme culture can be defined as a "heterogeneous mixage" of cultural forms (Danesi 2019: 6), where multiple, sometimes opposite and apparently incompatible dimensions are creatively incorporated. Due to their similar characteristics, memes are sometimes confused with viral content. As Shifman contends, the main difference between the two lies in their variability: "whereas the viral comprises a single cultural unit (such a video, photo, or joke), that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme is always a collection of texts" (Shifman 2013b: 56). Another common misunderstanding regards the format that memetic content can take. What is commonly recognized as "meme" is an image combined with a superimposed text, which is, in fact, called "image macro," and it is just one of the many genres of Internet memes that one can encounter in the digital environment. Memes can be videos, audio tracks, lip dubs like the ones that popularized TikTok and other platforms before it, and many other kinds of content. To further complicate things (and make memes an even more interesting object of research), the memetic landscape is continually evolving. The same meme genres we are able to recognize today are going to display new rules, styles, and features, according to the evolution of technological tools, platforms, creators, audiences, tastes, and scopes. We have experienced an example of such evolution in the change[22] that determined the dawn of LOLcats and Rage Comics and the rise of genres like "deep fried" memes, memes based on popular short video and audio clips, or memes that address social and political issues[23]. As Miltner observed in 2017, "In the space of a decade, Internet memes have gone from quirky, subcultural oddities to a ubiquitous, arguably foundational, digital media practice" (412). Five years later, the relevance of Internet memes is broadly recognized both outside and inside the academic context[24]. Today, memes do not only connect people on social media, but also offline, experimenting new forms of expression in stand-up comedy shows[25], performing arts projects (PARC 2022)[26], and meme-culture festivals like *Memissima* in Turin, Italy (Memissima 2022). Events like these are a further demonstration of the ever-changing nature of memetic culture, since meme creators (or "memers") performing in front of a public and receiving awards indicate that the traditional perception of memes as collectively made content lacking a recognizable authorship is no longer valid. This change, whether temporary or not, does not undermine the participatory nature at the heart of memetic culture. Memes are ultimately a social activity through which people combine, recognize, and collectively discuss shared references not only as a form of entertainment but also to create bonds and identify themselves as members of the broader Internet culture and of the communities that have found a place in it.

Jessica Fletcher Goes Social

Content in Italian dedicated to *Murder, She Wrote* can be found on all major social media platforms[27]. By entering the string "*La Signora in Giallo*" as a

search key on YouTube, one can find videos titled "*La Signora in Giallo: 10 cose che potresti non sapere*" (10 things you may not know about *La Signora in Giallo*), with 20,081 views, or "*La risata di fine puntata di Jessica Fletcher*" (Jessica Fletcher's end-of-episode laugh), with 28,437 views. The most popular video, however, is the memorable theme song of *Murder, She Wrote*, with 530,657 views. On Facebook, people created pages and groups dedicated to the iconic television show. Their descriptions are revealing of the level of engagement of the series' fandom: "When a TV character becomes a myth, a model, a lifestyle"; "(Join this group) If a weekday lunch is not a real lunch without an episode of *La Signora in Giallo*, if every time you think 'heck, I already watched this episode,' but then you watch it anyways." One of these pages, "*La Signora in Giallo*: Style, Cooking and Murders with JB Fletcher," classified as a personal blog, shares daily news on the series' characters, actors, and settings, as well as recipes inspired by the ones that Jessica Fletcher cooks in the show. Many posts focus on the protagonist's iconic outfits, which are presented as part of a "#jessicafletcherchallenge" in which followers are asked to vote for their favorite outfit in the comments section. The Facebook group "Jessica Fletcher Rules!" offers daily updates too, but in this case, the members of the community mainly share pictures of their television screens and comments like: "Finally aunt Jessica is with us during lunchtime 😍." In the group's threads, the character is frequently referred to as "*zia Jess*" ("aunt Jess"), and, here too, complimented for her style ("Refined, light and delicate nuances … always very elegant").

As McCulloch puts it, "Any community that talks with each other via the Internet now has its own set of memes" (2019: 259). This is definitely the case for the Italian fanbase of *Murder, She Wrote*, both on Facebook and Instagram. The memes we will talk about are mainly examples of the aforementioned image macros, a genre of Internet memes made of an image with captioned text. Image macros (or simply "macros") are one of the most pervasive and recognizable kind of memes because they are easier to create compared other memes (e.g., videos or heavily altered pictures)[28]. They are often based on popular television and movie characters. What these characters have to offer to meme creators is not only some memorable visuals (e.g., their facial expressions or poses) to remix and parody but also a set of shared references and meanings that the public can immediately recognize. These references can stem from specific iconic scenes and quotes or from the general plot and are usually combined with other references to create layers of meaning that are meant to surprise and amuse the audience.

The main difference between the *La Signora in Giallo* themed memes posted on the two platforms is that, while on Facebook they seem to be mainly shared by and among the series' fandom communities, on Instagram Jessica Fletcher appears in memes posted by a larger variety of accounts, mainly meme pages that use multiple references instead of focusing on a specific one. The fact that the users who created them can count on her recognizability to a general, broader audience confirms her relevance in Italian popular culture.

As Danesi points out, a successful meme is "highly reproducible, recognizable, and easily shared" (2019: 42). The representation of *La Signora in Giallo* in memes plays with a set of recurring elements that are associated with the television series and its main character. In the next few paragraphs, we are going to introduce the ones that emerged more frequently from the observation of memes found on Facebook and Instagram.

One of the main features that Jessica Fletcher is remembered for is that wherever she goes, someone gets murdered. This inevitable element of the plot, on which every episode of the series is based, has become a recurring joke among its audience. In some memes, indeed, she is portrayed as an astute elderly lady who is actually the culprit of every murder she investigates. Jessica Fletcher's nice and friendly appearance, combined with the apparently quiet setting of Cabot Cove[29], contrasts with her involvement in the investigation of crime stories, similar to what happens in Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. In memes, this feature is employed to combine smiling pictures of Angela Lansbury by sinister statements[30]. In one of the macros, for example, she says "You're gonna die too, sooner or later." In another meme, Angela Lansbury is, as we often observed[31], identified with her character. She is portrayed as she meets, in what is defined a "final match," Queen Elizabeth II. All the references are made explicit in the text overlays, in which they are presented as: "Angela Lansbury / The lady in yellow / Wherever I go someone dies" and "Queen Elizabeth / The immortal / Come on, try." The pictures of Angela Lansbury meeting Queen Elizabeth II have inspired other memes that pointed at the longevity of the two women, who both passed away in 2022 at the age of 96.

Considering what we just mentioned, it is little wonder that that many memes dedicated to *La Signora in Giallo* allude to the superstition that surrounds the character of Jessica Fletcher. In one of them, we see her walking by the ocean, and the caption says: "One minute before the submersible imploded." The reference here is to the implosion of the Titan, the submersible operated by OceanGate, in June 2023. What might be surprising, instead, is that someone even created and merchandised a *Murder, She Wrote*-themed ceramic stoup where the popular "Who's dead?" meme is translated into the Latin "*Qui mortuus est?*" to recall a Catholic phrase. In the Instagram post where it appears, the concept of "Fletcherism" is introduced as the worship of "better being your friend." In the caption, the product is advertised to people who find themselves involved in murders everywhere they go and whose friends always carry horn-shaped pendants and garlic braids as amulets against bad luck when they see them.

Another frequent allusion we found in memes is the one to Jessica Fletcher's alleged vices. She is the protagonist of a series of memes in which she is represented as dealing with alcohol and drug abuse. In one of them, for example, the caption says: "When you need money to sustain your dependencies, but the *INPS* (Italian pensions system) website is blocked." In the second one, Jessica says: "Now auntie is going to show you something. Ketamine in

brandy." Memes like these play with the idea of an apparently ordinary older woman who is in fact the protagonist of a series of unordinary, mysterious events. Taking it to an extreme – and taking advantage of Angela Lansbury's expressiveness – memers imagine an alternative Jessica Fletcher, who instead of solving murder cases spends her days at parties or roaming around Cabot Cove either drunk or high.

From a linguistic point of view, it is perhaps worth noting that the memes on the series circulating in Italian social media pages are, in part, the ones that were originally created in English, like the aforementioned "Who's dead?" and more recent ones, shared from *Murder, She Wrote*-themed meme accounts. Memes in English are sometimes translated into Italian, but some of them are shared as they are, especially when they address an audience of users who are expected to be familiar with the language or who can understand it from the memes' structures, which are often recurring. The majority of memes we found, however, were in Italian. Interestingly, some even included words and expressions in a variety of Italian local dialects[32]. The inclusion of dialects in these memes is an example of how memers skillfully play with popular culture materials and characters to create layers of meaning and connect global and local dimensions. This mixture of different levels contributes to the playful irony that "seems to be the conceptual fuel that runs the Internet" (Danesi 2019: 58). One of the memes in which she appears is translatable as: "Ah! I almost forgot … say hi to your sister" – a saying in Neapolitan that might sound like a nice farewell, but which actually contains some kind of sexual allusion to the sister of the listener. Once again, we find a sharp contrast between Jessica Fletcher's appearance and the content of the meme's textual part. In some Instagram reels, imaginary episodes of *La Signora in Giallo* are set in the Veneto region. In these brief and unpolished memetic fanfictions, the characters speak the local dialect, and Jessica Fletcher is asked to solve the mystery of *nonno* (grandpa) Luigino's death.

As McCulloch observes, "creating, sharing, or laughing at a meme is staking a claim to be an insider" (2019: 258). The insiders who created and interacted with the memes that we just talked about are probably people who used to watch *La Signora in Giallo* on television when they were younger, and now seem to play with the series with a certain nostalgia. Arguably, they do not only do so to creatively revitalize the show or celebrate its protagonist but also to connect with other users who share the same memories and references.. A common scene evoked in the memes we analyzed, as well as their comment sections, is the shared childhood memory of watching episodes of *La Signora in Giallo* at home, after school, and during lunchtime. The situation – and the engagement with the series – are represented, for example, in a meme featuring what is known in meme culture as "Cereal Guy," a stick figure who, while eating cereal, points at the television, exclaiming: "Jessica, don't go to the appointment, it's a trap!." This kind of content is understandable by any fan of the series, but it seems to be especially relatable for the millennials

among them. For Italians belonging to this generation[33] who used to watch *La Signora in Giallo* when they were kids, the show has become part of the galaxy of media and popular culture objects that generate a nostalgia that has slightly different traits than anyone else's. As Miltner maintains, "internet memes succeed because of their 'emotional resonance' with audiences; people share memes [...] because they are emotionally compelled by some aspect of the media object with which they are engaging" (2017: 414). Millennials are the first generation to come of age during the Internet and social media era and to get old in it[34]. For them, creating and seeing memes of Jessica Fletcher and other television characters from the 1980s–1990s on the screens of their smartphones is not only an amusing and bittersweet recollection of the past but also an opportunity to collectively connect with and reimagine the elements of a world that no longer exists.

Conclusions

In this study, we conducted an analysis of the Italian adaptation of *Murder, She Wrote* and its long-lasting success in Italian popular culture. To better understand the reasons behind the appeal of the series and identify the features of its adaptation in a foreign context, we took into consideration the strategies implemented by Italian translators and dialogue writers. We focused on two representative episodes, which revealed translation trends such as

- the low presence of taboo language through under-translation techniques;
- the domestication of the American television product through the insertion of arbitrary references to Italian culture;
- the rewriting and softening of some of the show's most controversial elements.

Functioning like a sort of security blanket, these translation strategies allowed the Italian audience to become familiar with more specific aspects of the American way of life without feeling too lost. Furthermore, thanks to an interrupted airing in various Italian channels for more than thirty years, Jessica Fletcher's voice actress Alina Moradei became as iconic and familiar to the Italian public as the character she gave voice to.

In the second section of the chapter, we tried to identify the trajectory that led the Italian adaptation of *Murder, She Wrote* from television to social media. We focused on a specific kind of social media content, Internet memes, to analyze what their main features and functions can tell us about the series' fandom and the set of shared references that social media users play with for entertainment and community building purposes. After introducing the concepts of participatory culture and Internet memes, we observed that the circulation of memes on *La Signora in Giallo* shows different trends on different platforms. On Facebook, they are regularly shared on fan groups, while on Instagram they are randomly posted by a variety of pages and meme accounts and show

a higher contamination with other references. As emerged from our analysis, the memes dedicated to the series:

- play with the contrast between Jessica Fletcher's appearance and her connection to murder and mystery;
- frequently present references to superstition;
- jokingly allude to Jessica Fletcher's alleged problems with alcohol and drugs;
- present a certain linguistic variation that builds a bridge between global and local dimensions.

Finally, we argued that most of the memes themed around *La Signora in Giallo* not only have an entertaining function but also speak on an emotional level to the identity and shared memories of people who used to watch the series during their childhood. The memetic representations of *Murder, She Wrote* in the Italian context and the interactions that they generate prove the success of the series and the public's affection for its protagonist. Furthermore, they offer a lens through which we can look at the role and evolution of 20th century's popular culture icons in the digital era.

Notes

1 Roughly translatable as *The Lady in Yellow*, the Italian title of the show echoes the name of detective and mystery genres, simply called *giallo* (yellow) in Italian. The origin of this name dates back to 1929, when the Arnoldo Mondadori publishing house from Milan decided to publish detective fiction with yellow covers. Starting from the early 1960s, English-speaking audiences, instead, began to use the term *giallo* to refer specifically to a genre of Italian-produced thriller-horror movies. The title *La Signora in Giallo* refers exclusively to the *giallo* literary genre.
2 In Europe, countries can be divided according to their approaches to the translation of audiovisual products. Subtitling countries include Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Hungary, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, and Wales. Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland, and Spain, instead, figure among the most prominent dubbing countries (Perego 2005: 16).
3 For a detailed list of the professionals who worked on the Italian version of *Murder, She Wrote* see: https://www.antoniogenna.net/doppiaggio/telefilm/lasignoraingiallo.htm.
4 For a comprehensive analysis of the spread of English in Italy and the influence of Anglo-American culture on Italian society, see Carlucci (2018) and Pulcini (2019).
5 Italian public broadcasting service (RAI) had a monopoly on television broadcasting until the middle 1970s.
6 First aired on CBS on November 8, 1987.
7 First aired on RAI 1 on July 19, 1990.
8 First aired on CBS on April 9, 1989.
9 First aired on RAI 1 on March 19, 1993.
10 See Horowitz (2023).
11 The episode was written by Wendy Graf and Lisa Stotsky.
12 The episode was written by Robert Van Scoyk.

13 Dr. Hazlitt: "There's a full assortment... of thieves, philanderers, liars, moral deviants... and a particularly odious bookworm called 'the Geek.'"
14 In an interview, Moradei revealed that, at a certain point, she was approached by RAI for an Italian remake of *Murder, She Wrote*. The woman politely declined as she preferred to work behind the scenes of Italian show business (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkZVHtwCkjU).
15 The ceremony was broadcast live on Canale 5 and watched by as many as nine million Italians (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gran_Premio_Internazionale_dello_Spettacolo).
16 A *telegatto*, a compound word formed by "*televisione*" and "*gatto*," is an Italian television award first established in 1971 that consists of a little statue representing a cat. Winning this award also allowed Lansbury to leave her handprints at the Milan Walk of Fame (Largo Corsia dei Servi, 21). After the actress' death on October 11, 2022, Italian fans brought flowers to the site to commemorate the late star (https://www.fanpage.it/milano/fiori-sulla-mattonella-con-limpronta-e-la-firma-angela-lansbury-milano-commemora-la-signora-in-giallo/).
17 It should be pointed out that, as Jenkins observes, there are still great disparities in people's access to technologies, digital media literacy, and the Internet itself.
18 The portmanteau "prosumers" was coined to refer to this phenomenon.
19 Evidently, memes dedicated to successful media products are not only created by organized communities of fans, but also – although less consistently – by "outsiders" who decide to use some of their references for entertainment and humorous purposes. As we will see, this also applies to the case of *La Signora in Giallo*.
20 Dawkins coined the word "meme" from the combination of the ancient Greek "mimeme," meaning "that which is imitated," and "gene."
21 For an in-depth discussion of the theoretical origins and definition of memes, and the history of internet memes, see Miltner (2017) and Wiggins (2020).
22 McCulloch touches upon the impact of the generational change from Full Internet People to Post Internet People on memes (2019: 252).
23 Wiggins posits that internet memes, "especially those which incorporate a critical message," are "a new form of artistic expression [...] one that conceptually traces back to Dadaism, Surrealism, and related forms of art" (2020: 18).
24 The word "meme" used as a search query on Google Scholar produces 1,120,000 results. If the search is limited to papers published in the first 8 months of 2023, the results are 16,400 (updated August 31, 2023).
25 https://gizmodo.com/instagram-memes-wikipedia-sold-out-live-shows-1850040438.
26 https://parcfirenze.net/il-teatropostaggio-da-un-milione-di-dollari-residenza/.
27 The data for this study was accessed and collected in August 2023.
28 Online apps like Meme Generator or tools like Instagram Stories allow users to easily add text to images or personalize already existing meme templates.
29 The fictional town, as different as it is from Italian towns, could nevertheless recall to the public some of the features of the Italian "*provincia*" (countryside).
30 Something similar happens in memes on the Italian television series *Don Matteo*, in which a Catholic priest in a parish of the town of Gubbio, Perugia, investigates local murders.
31 In many cases, pictures of Angela Lansbury are used to represent Jessica Fletcher even when the actress is not playing that role. Considering the success of *Murder, She Wrote* in Italy compared to other movies and series in which the actress starred in, it should come as no surprise that even Angela Lansbury's death was announced on Italian television and social media as if Jessica Fletcher herself passed away.
32 It is important to note that the label "dialect" is not intended to mean "dialects of Italian," as what is called *dialetti* in the Italian context are independent languages, equally descended from Latin. Their subordination to the current official language of the country has its origins in historical, political, and cultural factors.

33 Millennials are generally identified as people born between 1981 and 1996. Even though defining boundaries and characteristics of each generation is an oversimplification, generational thinking can help us understand how shared life experiences shape the opportunities, perspectives, and behaviors of certain social groups. For a range of perspectives on millennials and media ecology, see Cristiano and Atay (2019).

34 A reflection on the evolution of millennials' online presence can be found on: https://www.wired.com/story/growing-old-online/.

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10 'Now, Am I Imagining Things, or Isn't that a Little Fairy Person There in among the Flowers?'

Constructions of 'Ireland' in *Murder, She Wrote*

Eva Burke

The links between *Murder, She Wrote* and Ireland are well established. Several episodes of the show, including 'The Wind Around the Tower' (1992) and 'A Killing in Cork' (1993), feature protagonist Jessica Fletcher visiting Ireland, and actress Angela Lansbury has owned a home in County Cork since the late 1960s. The show is popular in Ireland to this day, with episodes broadcast daily via Sky TV. This chapter will explore why a show about a retired mystery writer solving crimes in rural Maine remains so popular in Ireland, particularly in light of its depiction of Ireland as something more akin to De Valera's notorious midcentury ideal of a land of saints and scholars (and stereotypes) than an authentic depiction of the nation. It is also worth noting that according to crime fiction scholar Brian Cliff (2018), Irish readers and writers of crime fiction have traditionally betrayed a generic distrust of structures of legal authority, particularly structures inherited from British colonial rule. Interestingly, Cliff identifies the 'cosy village mystery' (which *Murder, She Wrote* embodies) as a subgenre of crime fiction, which has not taken root in contemporary Irish crime fiction.

It might seem contradictory, then, that a show like *Murder, She Wrote* has found such a significant audience among Irish viewers. In fact, the private detective novel has flourished in contemporary Ireland; authors like Declan Hughes and Arlene Hunt have found critical and commercial success with their respective Irish PI series. Perhaps Jessica, as an American with Irish roots who is unburdened with any institutional affiliation, represents an amateur sleuth close enough to the PI archetype to appeal to Irish audiences. This chapter will investigate the show's depiction of Ireland and Irishness as quaintly superstitious, old-fashioned and parochial, and the extent to which contemporary Irish anxieties are nonetheless represented during Jessica's navigation (and investigation) of this landscape. This chapter will also explore the significance of Jessica as a child-free older woman traversing a simulacrum of twentieth-century Ireland – Jessica visits in the 1990s and early 2000s, and while we might expect to see some evidence of the Celtic Tiger boom in these episodes and films, the country is depicted as a rural idyll (complete with tales

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of leprechauns and ghostly maidens) rather than a nation in the midst of economic growth and urban expansion.

Rather than a reliance on traditional power structures, the focus of the 'cosy' mystery is on social 'intimacy' and, with it, the figure of the amateur or independent investigator. While there are numerous cultural and historical factors potentially informing potential distrust of legal authorities in the Irish context (not least Ireland's existence as a postcolonial country currently reckoning with its own legacy of institutional abuse), the focus of this chapter will be on *Murder, She Wrote*'s depiction of crime-solving within a fictionalised version of Ireland and the extent to which the show's appeal within Ireland can tell us something about perceptions of Ireland from within and without.

Ireland and Angela

When news broke of the death of 96- year-old Angela Lansbury in October of 2022, the public expressions of grief which naturally follow the loss of a celebrity rang especially prominently from Irish media outlets and social media accounts. This was to be expected; Lansbury, who often spoke with pride of her Northern Irish grandmother, had periodically resided in rural Ireland since 1970, and had become a fondly regarded mainstay of her East Cork community (*Irish Times*, 2022). Lansbury's connections to Ireland and the extent to which she was embraced by these communities serve as something of a real-world parallel to the affection with which the character of Jessica is regarded in the country; for decades, the series has aired on Irish television network TG4, national broadcaster RTE and on Sky TV. Journalist Patrick Freyne remembers watching the show daily as a child in 1980s Ireland, noting that it was 'always on'. The series' ubiquity in Irish culture is still apparent – in the summer of 2024, Fine Gael politician Maria Walsh, seeking re-election to the European Parliament, shared a campaign video on social media, which recreated the opening credits of *Murder, She Wrote*, with Walsh in the role of Jessica Fletcher. The caption references 'endless reruns' of the show on Irish TV (Fine Gael Comms, 2024).

The Child-free Older Woman and Constructions of Irish Womanhood

Perhaps Jessica's child-free status might go some way towards explaining her appeal to Irish audiences; at a time when it was rare to see a female character happily unencumbered by children, she stood out as a middle-aged woman who enjoyed a fulfilling (if crime-filled) life beyond and outside of motherhood. And while her child-free status is unusual enough to be worth noting[1], it is not transgressive enough to alarm viewers; Jessica may not have children of her own, but she has a litany of nieces, nephews, young neighbours and former students in need of guidance and protection throughout the series (most notably her nephew Grady, who appears in several episodes). As a result, she

is able to move in and out of a quasi-maternal role with enough regularity to reassure audiences that she is different, but not dangerously so. Jessica maintains a unique relationship to structures of patriarchal authority; she dispenses justice, but is not a part of the police force, and she purposely embodies a maternal presence if and when she chooses to; in this way, she represents a kind of liberation from the all-or-nothing paradigm of maternal identity.

In an Irish context, the popularity of such a character is intriguing primarily because of the country's history of policing and punishing maternal bodies; although it should be noted that maternal bodies are subject to violence and scrutiny in many contexts, generations of Irish people have suffered under a uniquely terrible religious and patriarchal regime, one inextricably linked to the struggle for postcolonial identity. This complex and painful history of institutional abuse has emerged more and more prominently in the public consciousness in recent years, thanks in no small part to the efforts of historian Catherine Corless. Corless's research[2] into the deaths of children at a Galway mother and baby home has shone an international spotlight on a legacy of abuse, secrecy, neglect and lies. It is certainly outside the remit of this chapter to unpack that legacy, but some background may serve to contextualise the popularity of a character who seeks to fix injustice while remaining independent from institutional power.

Following the Irish war of independence in the early twentieth century, the new Irish state, eager to establish an identity distinct from that of the colonial power, relied in part on the politics of gender and sexuality to do so:

> Underpinning the construction of Ireland's newly emergent nation-state was a national imaginary that needed to clearly differentiate Irish identity from British identity, a task undertaken through recourse to the themes of purity, chastity, and virtue. The corollary of each of these, impurity, licentiousness, and vice, were attributed to the morally corrupt former colonizer, allowing the distinctness and superiority of Irish identity to be secured with particular reference to moral purity, bolstered by Catholic social teaching.
>
> (Fischer, 2016).

In Catholic Ireland, the virtues of frugality, monogamy and 'right living' would be emphasised. The new Ireland, often anthropomorphised as a female figure[3], was fundamentally linked to moral and sexual purity, particularly in regard to Irish women and girls. Former political leader Eamon De Valera, who had been instrumental in the foundation of the state, famously articulated his 'imagined' Ireland in a 1943 radio speech:

> The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit - a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads,

> whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose fire sides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that we should live.
>
> (De Valera, 1943).

The connection between the integrity of this imagined Ireland and the spiritual integrity of its young people is made especially clear in a 1925 statement from the Bishops of Maynooth, during which the dangers of 'imported dances'[4] are emphasised:

> There is danger of losing the name which the chivalrous honour of Irish boys and the Christian reserve of Irish maidens had won for Ireland. If our people part with the character that gave rise to that name, we lose with it much of our national strength, and still more of the high rank we have held in the Kingdom of Christ. Purity is strength, and purity and faith go together. Both virtues are in danger these times, but purity is more directly assailed than faith.
>
> (Irish Hierarchy Statement on Dancing (1925), 2012).

Perhaps inevitably, this vision of a nation focused on traditional gender roles served as the foundation for a restrictive and sexually repressed culture, one in which female sexual autonomy was often brutally curtailed. Anyone unfortunate enough to contradict or undermine this construction of Irish identity was, consequently, punished, contained or 'rescued'. Following the formation of the Irish state in the early twentieth century, the necessity of upholding these 'virtues', cornerstones of independent Ireland, led to greater political and cultural influence for the Catholic Church. As a result, thousands of Irish women who fell afoul of the edicts of the Church were confined in convents, laundries and mother and baby homes. Some of these women were 'guilty' of falling pregnant outside of marriage, some of being sexually assaulted or simply of appearing promiscuous. These institutions became notorious for their state-sanctioned cruelty. While disclosure of the abuses endured within has been slow but steady (and, frankly, hampered by government and Church lethargy), films like *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998) and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) have gone some way towards drawing international attention to this painful history.

Where, then, does this leave Jessica, with her 'Irish roots'? The Ireland depicted in *Murder, She Wrote* is not a million miles away from De Valera's land of cosy homesteads. During Jessica's first visit, in the 1992 episode 'The Wind Around the Tower' (set in Ireland but filmed primarily in California), she is keen to 'get a feel of everyday life in Ireland', but the Ireland she encounters is not recognisable as a country on the cusp of economic boom, cultural expansion and the disclosure of painful secrets. She visits a small village 'about an

hour outside of Dublin', where she stays at a large country house. Upon her arrival in the country, we see her travel past a patchwork of fields, accompanied by her friend Sean, who jokes about exporting Irish convicts to Australia in exchange for Australian soap operas[5]. When they reach their destination, a cosy little town surrounded by green fields, Jessica is told that she is 'the biggest news to hit town since the great flood of "32"', a claim which serves to underscore the provinciality of the village (and perhaps, by extension, the country). The locals are depicted as friendly but superstitious, with a strong belief in apparently supernatural forces: 'You see things in the woods some nights, like lights. And then there's the voices, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, sounding far away, like from another world, right next to you'.

Jessica, true to form, is immediately pulled into a related local mystery, during which she must solve the murder of a local landowner. While everyone around her is keen to attribute the death to a ghostly female figure who has been heard 'crying' nearby, Jessica is able to find a logical explanation and uncovers a plot involving deadly nitrogen tanks. There is a familiar trope at work here – the detective, a rational agent, demystifies a seemingly unnatural or supernatural incident (akin to Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) or 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (1924), but we may argue that the positioning of the Irish locals as credulous and irrational carries particular historical weight[6] and reinforces the notion that this is a place trapped in time, populated by people for whom an unexplained death is more likely to be the result of ghostly or divine intervention than human malfeasance. As Jill E. Anderson argues elsewhere in this collection, Jessica's frequent travels across *Murder, She Wrote*'s twelve seasons sometimes led to problematic or stereotypical depictions of the world outside Cabot Cove – the stereotypes chosen to represent Ireland are interesting insofar as they validate a kind of ideal of Irishness even as the central murder, which Jessica is tasked with solving, pulls at the threads of this ideal and hints at darker and more complicated identities and tensions. Declan Kiberd's 1995 work *Inventing Ireland* ponders the figurative construction of 'Ireland', suggesting that Ireland has long existed, particularly pre-independence, as 'a foil to set off English virtues […] and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters' (Kiberd, 1995). The Ireland that we see here fits the bill as a charmingly old-fashioned and quasi-mystical landscape into which Jessica is welcomed. The mysteries that she solves are run-of-the-mill human crimes, but the notion of Ireland as a land of magical happenings is never entirely dispelled; Jessica jokes during her first visit to Cork that she believes she has captured an image of a 'little fairy person among the flowers'. The fact that she has recently been embroiled in solving several violent crimes notwithstanding, the viewer is left with an impression of Ireland as a slightly unreal or mythical space.

The positioning of Jessica in this picture postcard version of Ireland presents an interesting juxtaposition. Jessica is a child-free older woman who is independently wealthy and tasked with solving the central mystery. As an outsider, she is not burdened with institutional power or any of the historical

baggage that accompanies it in Ireland. As such, she remains separate from the values of the 'old Ireland' that the episode seems keen to foreground. She is inarguably a 'respectable' woman, having been married and widowed, but the things that she represents (female autonomy, ingenuity, and a meaningful life outside of motherhood) are at odds with the regressive gender norms of this one-dimensional Ireland. Nathalie Atkinson has credited the show with centring a kind of 'low-lying feminism', which allowed it to fly, gently subversive, under the radar on network television. While questions regarding the series' feminist credentials are explored elsewhere in this collection, it is certainly striking, as an Irish viewer, to watch Jessica (assured, intelligent, and content without children) inhabit a space which resembles a theme-park version of 1950s Ireland.

Intriguingly, there are also hints of contemporary Irish tensions bleeding through the veneer of Celtic mysticism and Irish stereotypes – the episode's murder is revealed to be the result of an extramarital affair between the victim's wife and a local chemist. The breakdown of a marriage in Ireland in the early 1990s was complicated by the Irish constitution, which prohibited divorce. A 1986 amendment to the constitution was proposed but failed to pass a public referendum; in 1995, a second referendum was held, and the constitution ultimately amended to allow divorce. The Catholic Church, predictably, strongly opposed both referenda and warned that allowing married couples to divorce would inevitably lead to the disintegration of the nation's moral fabric[7]. In 'The Wind Around the Tower', the killer wife's motive is financial ('all she wanted was the money') and the case quickly solved without much interrogation of her infidelity, but it is fitting that Jessica's first Irish visit coincides with a violent marital separation.

Jessica's second trip to Irish shores is the focus of 'A Killing in Cork', which first aired in 1993. Hoping to research her aforementioned 'Irish roots', she visits her recently bereaved friend Fiona in the fictional town of Kilcleer, Cork. Kilcleer is another rather crudely rendered vision of Ireland – we see green hills, a quaint pub, and even a local drunk, Billy. At one point, Jessica jokes during a traffic altercation that 'we might as well be in midtown Manhattan', once more underscoring the enormous difference between a busy, diverse urban hub and this cosy little village. While the Celtic Tiger had yet to roar in 1993, Ireland in the 1990s was home to various multinationals, including Intel[8], one of the country's largest employers since 1989. While it may be unfair to expect *Murder, She Wrote* to diverge from its format and offer a nuanced portrait of contemporary Ireland, the brand of Irishness centred here can tell us something about constructions of national identity, both internal and external ('A Killing in Cork' is set in Ireland but was filmed entirely in the United States using stock footage of rural Ireland).

During her visit, Jessica inevitably gets entangled in a murder mystery, again with a potentially supernatural bent – a local woman, Una O'Reilly, tells Jessica about the 'gancanagh', a leprechaun, who supposedly lurks around the churchyard. The other Irish characters are quick to dismiss Una as 'a sad case',

implying that she is imagining things due to the trauma of witnessing a violent death earlier in the year, but in the same conversation Jessica's friend Fiona, a supposedly rational woman, quite casually refers to playing with leprechauns as a young girl. Once more, the Irish are markedly superstitious and narratively aligned with mysticism and folklore. As in 'The Wind Around the Tower', the murderer is revealed to be entirely human, and again the circumstances of the murder are particularly noteworthy from the perspective of an Irish viewer: one of the victims is Ambrose, an American cousin who has arrived to take over the family business, a woollen mill, and move it away from the village. There is much discussion between characters of the importance of the mill to the local community ('without the mill the village will die') – ultimately, Ambrose is murdered to prevent the move from taking place.

While this episode again relies on certain Irish stereotypes and depicts its Irish characters as parochial and naive, there are, again, real and deep-rooted anxieties lurking in the subtext – the disparity between rural and urban investment and the abandonment of smaller Irish communities was and is a pressing national issue, with a steady decline in rural population figures since the 1960s. Ambrose, the American cousin and murder victim, is roughly sketched as a thoroughly unpleasant man (which is helpful insofar as it allows viewers and characters to focus on the central mystery without having to spend time sympathising), but in a broader sense embodies very real tensions and fears surrounding the march of economic progress which is otherwise nowhere to be seen in the episode. The character of Una also calls to mind the country's history of marginalising and silencing troublesome women – while she is dismissed as unstable by the people around her, she is ultimately revealed to be the only witness to a murder. It is also revealed that she had a romantic relationship with Fiona's late husband Robert: 'they were lovers since she was 16'. This goes largely unremarked upon and is presumably supposed to be read as romantic and/or tragic rather than genuinely troubling, but stands out as covertly sinister, particularly when we consider cases like that of Ann Lovett[9], whose death had occurred less than a decade prior to the episode airing. Once again, a kind of hyperreal effect is inadvertently achieved for Irish viewers – this picture of Ireland is at once familiar, cartoonish, outdated and resonant. Jessica's adventures in Ireland serve to refract rather than reflect Ireland in the 1990s, but they nonetheless speak to certain national preoccupations and anxieties buried deep in the national unconscious. It is fascinating and fitting that one of the country's most popular fictional detectives brushes up against these anxieties while traversing a fictional version of the nation.

Notes

1 While characters like *Sex and the City*'s Samantha Jones would embody the unapologetically and happily child-free woman towards the end of the twentieth century, earlier iterations of the child-free female character were often more dubiously framed as perverse, pathetic or even *dangerous* – Susan Faludi's 1991 book *Backlash* explores these caricatures in some depth.

2 Over the course of her research, Corless discovered that the remains of 796 babies had been disposed of in a septic tank on the grounds of Tuam Mother and Baby Home. Excavation of the site is ongoing, with the aim of giving the children a 'dignified burial'. Corless has spoken of the importance of further exploration and exhumation of several other former mother and baby homes around the country, as she believes that there are likely more unmarked burial sites.
3 A prominent example is Yeats and Gregory's 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. This personification and gendering of land serves a few purposes, one of which is to reinforce the notion of the feminine as *acted upon* rather than active; according to Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, '[the aim] is to confirm and reproduce the social arrangements which construct women as material possessions, not as speaking subjects' (Cullingford, 1990).
4 We certainly do not see any 'imported dances' during Jessica's Irish vacations – in 'A Killing in Cork', she is entertained by the Ballynoe Tripsters, a troupe of young Irish dancers. This is specifically noted as an example of 'young people maintaining their traditions'.
5 In an episode that seems determined to persuade viewers that Ireland remains aesthetically and culturally entrenched in the 1950s, this reference to 'infernal Australian soap operas' will strike a chord for Irish audiences – since 1988, Australian soaps *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* have proven incredibly popular in Ireland. Journalist Ed Power coincidentally invokes *Murder, She Wrote* in his discussion of this incongruous popularity, saying that Irish broadcaster RTE was still in many ways a 50s broadcaster that regarded the modern world as something to be ignored or viewed with fear and suspicion. American imports such as *The A-Team* and *Murder, She Wrote* offered some succour, it is true. But these were, in their own way, no less chaste. '*Home And Away*, by contrast, was awash with bitchiness, backstabbing and relationship drama' (Irish Independent, 2018).
6 Imperialist anti-Irish sentiment was typically mediated through caricatures in magazines like *Punch* throughout the nineteenth century; these cartoons often depicted the Irish as primitive, simian, stupid, and drunk. The 'stage Irishman' also reinforced stereotypes of Irishmen as blundering, violent and belligerent.
7 Irish people were warned that allowing divorce would lead to the breakdown of families (One 'vote no' slogan read 'Hello Divorce – Bye Bye Daddy') and the widespread abandonment of wives.
8 The Irish Intel campus, established in 1989, is the largest in the world outside of the United States and represents the largest private investment ever made in the Irish state.
9 Ann Lovett, a fifteen-year-old girl from County Longford, was found close to death next to a grotto in the winter of 1984. She had haemorrhaged while giving birth to a son, having apparently hidden her pregnancy from family and neighbours. Ann's son did not survive the labour, and she too died shortly after discovery. While an inquest found that some locals had known about the pregnancy, many unanswered questions hang over what became a national tragedy. Moira J. Maguire pinpoints the case as a reckoning of sorts: 'the community was forced, by one young girl's personal and painful dilemma, to wrestle with how it defined right and wrong, inclusion and exclusion, punished transgressions from the norm, and negotiated the limits of a community's responsibility for its most vulnerable members' (Maguire, 2001).

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Part IV

Influences, Intertextuality and Echoes

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11 "Agatha Christie's Ghost May Strike You Dead!"

Murder, She Wrote and an Agatha Christie Sense of Murder

Mark Aldridge

It is no secret that *Murder, She Wrote* owes some debt to the world of Agatha Christie. In fact, in the early years of the show, the connection was sometimes touted as a selling point to both network executives and the (potential) viewing public before the series was able to establish its own identity more firmly. This chapter explores the connections between Christie's work and *Murder, She Wrote*, paying particular attention to the first season of the show (1984–1985). This formative season saw the programme turn its hand to several approaches to murder mysteries, some of which would not be revisited after this first run, while it honed a formula that would enable its ongoing international success. To explore the ways in which the programme both used and reworked the works of Agatha Christie, I will first need to establish the important production influences that earlier Christie-related projects had on the creation of *Murder, She Wrote*, as well as Christie's character Miss Marple. Then, I will look at the way that some of Christie's best-known tropes and tricks were used by the programme, paying particular attention to the ways that it transformed some of these ideas and approaches to make them suitable for American network television. While the use of the word "tropes" may imply that Christie offered repetitive and highly formulaic stories, this was not the case, even if we may recognise some of the devices that she re-used and helped to establish as classic scenarios of the crime fiction genre. However, Christie also played with the mystery form, and this chapter will also consider how this is reflected in these early episodes, before finally looking at how the series managed to forge its own identity.

The creators of *Murder, She Wrote* have generally told the same story of its creation, the impetus for which was the success of the CBS/Warner Bros television movie of the Miss Marple novel *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), starring Helen Hayes and first broadcast on 22 October 1983. This was one of an occasional series of movies that Warner Bros was making for American network television, which placed Christie's mysteries into the then-present day and often added or emphasised American characters and actors. *Murder, She Wrote* co-creator Richard Levinson noted that "Helen Hayes as Miss Marple did well in the ratings. Bill [William Link] and Peter Fischer and I got together and decided, 'Let's not do Miss Marple. Let's make her a mystery writer, like

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Agatha Christie'" (Parish 1997: 3). For Fischer, it was this prospect of borrowing from both Christie as a person and Christie as a creator that appealed. "Why don't we meld Miss Marple and Miss Christie into one character," he thought, "a mystery writer who actually solves murder mysteries using logic, good sense, observation, and a twinkly sense of humor that masks the sharp brain lurking beneath a very attractive hair do" (Fischer 2013: 7). This mention of the character's styling may sound like a glib joke, but actually is an important reminder that older women who specialised in the quieter skills of reasoning and thinking generally did not helm major American television dramas at this time. There appeared to be an inherent fear from producers that this would make the series a hard sell at a time when the stars of television were often dynamic younger characters in the likes of *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980–8), *Simon & Simon* (CBS, 1981–9) and *The A-Team* (NBC, 1983–7). Besides careful styling, there needed to be some sort of extra spark from the character; some additional appeal that would ensure that she held an appeal for both audiences and advertisers. One immediate thought was to bring in a television performer whose popularity was well-established, with *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–9) star Jean Stapleton top of the list (Fischer 2013: 10). When she declined, producers had to think again, and this is where the links with Agatha Christie became further cemented.

This well-established story of the show's creation does not include one significant development, which may have simply been a coincidence: before Jessica Fletcher became the star of an American television series, Miss Marple was sounded out for the part. After the success of *A Caribbean Mystery*, the Agatha Christie estate was consulted about a potential long-running series starring the character, even though she had only appeared in twelve novels and twenty short stories, not all of which were suitable for American network television. Christie's grandson Mathew Prichard was then Chairman of the Agatha Christie Ltd board (Christie died in 1976) and later remembered:

> Two or three weeks after [*A Caribbean Mystery*] was shown, [producer] Alan Shayne rang up and said "We're in the money, Mathew, CBS want to sign up for sixty one-hour versions of Miss Marple on American network television!" […] I said to him, "Hang on Alan, there aren't sixty Miss Marple stories." He said, "Oh, don't worry about that, we'll invent our own!" And I said look, we don't do that. […] Literally, within a few months, *Murder, She Wrote* appeared. […] And for all the years they were on television, I think people did think they were by Agatha Christie […] People probably bought thousands of Agatha Christie books thinking they were *Murder, She Wrote*, so they were probably quite beneficial.
>
> (Aldridge 2016: 193–4)

But how much of Miss Marple is there in Jessica Fletcher? Miss Marple had first appeared in the 1927 short story "The Tuesday Night Club" (1927) before her novel debut in 1930's *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), and the

spinster sleuth had proven popular with readers, so was certainly a known quantity. As well as her own logical reasoning, Miss Marple employed her knowledge of human nature and parallels with her own English village of St Mary Mead to help her to crack whatever case she happened to be involved with. Most notably for this chapter, the 1980 film adaptation of *The Mirror Crack'd* (d. Guy Hamilton) starred one Angela Lansbury as the elderly sleuth. Made up to look older than her mid-50s, Lansbury was not pleased with the final film; according to her official biography, she found it unwatchable (Gottfried 1999: 248). Some critics, such as Rex Reed, were shocked that an injury early in the film relegated Miss Marple to the peripheries of the story: "If you're going to sprain her ankle in the first scene then send her home to knit doilies while everyone has all the fun – you don't need an actress of Lansbury's energy and resources. This grand but wasted actress could have phoned it in" (Bonanno 1987: 141). Meanwhile, Lansbury stated that "If this film is a success, I've been offered a whole string of Miss Marple movies, but realistically speaking, I think my future is in the theater" (Gottfried 1999: 247). For *Murder, She Wrote* co-creator William Link the casting of Jessica Fletcher was crucial, and Lansbury's role as Miss Marple had not gone unnoticed. "We wanted to do a show with an intelligent woman who solved things in her own right," he said, stating that Lansbury "had the English flavor of Miss Marple, and she had an intelligence, and an incisiveness" (Gottfried 1999: 255 & 257).

From the first episode, *Murder, She Wrote* establishes one important difference between Christie's creation and Jessica Fletcher. While Miss Marple had never married (making her a "spinster"), Jessica had enjoyed a happy union with her late husband Frank. This difference says something about the types of characters that were deemed suitable to lead network television series in the 1980s; perhaps an unmarried older woman may be viewed with suspicion by audiences and fellow fictional characters. As Shaw and Vanacker say in their dissection of Miss Marple, the character's marital status is well established, as she "reigns as spinster supreme," and "in appearance, age, manners, social class, she is the essence of the English spinster" (Shaw & Vanacker 1991: 42). Even in Christie's books, Miss Marple's "spinster" status created a reaction among others:

> Miss Marple evokes and makes use of many of the disturbing emotions that the spinster figure inspires: condescension and scorn, of course, but also various kinds of fear. The spinster is moral arbiter, curb of license and disorder, and image of repression: she is also what lies outside the normal expectations of a woman's life as it is lived in a patriarchal society and although this diminishes her it also gives her the power of the abnormal over the normal, to threaten, to judge, to undermine and to destroy.
> (Shaw & Vanacker 1991: 43)

Perhaps it is the case that Jessica Fletcher's widowed status makes her feel much *safer* for the audience. It offers a reassurance that this is a woman who

can find and maintain love, and sit within the "normal" expectations of society, at least as seen on television. Her loss also inspires sympathy rather than suspicion, while she operates as a flexible maternal figure (even though she does not have children of her own), thanks to the legion of nieces, nephews, and cousins encountered across the series. Although the *New York Times* quoted Lansbury describing Jessica Fletcher as resembling "an American Miss Marple" when the series was announced in April 1984, she was keen to emphasise the differences: "Jessica is an innately sophisticated person, even though she's from a small village in Maine," Lansbury observed. "She's very well educated and fits in everywhere. […] At first I was going to wear a wig with a lot of gray in it. And my family got around and said, 'No, you go out there and play yourself.' There was no reason to make her dowdy. Women from Maine are terrific-looking dames at 59 or 60, which is my age" (Farber 1984: 14). Decades later, Lansbury argued that Jessica was "a far sharper sort of character, and I wanted to make her quite different from Miss Marple, so I didn't refer in my mind to Marple at all when I played Jessica" ("Interview With Angela Lansbury," StudioCanal, 2017).

Nevertheless, when the pilot episode of *Murder, She Wrote,* "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes," was broadcast on 30 September 1984, there was a major clue that Lansbury's recent portrayal of Miss Marple was an overt influence. The film of *The Mirror Crack'd* opens with Miss Marple watching an old mystery film alongside other residents of St Mary Mead. Unfortunately, the film is chewed up by the projector before the mystery can be solved; thankfully, Miss Marple has worked it out so shares the solution. This sequence was a new addition for the movie, not present in the original novel, and a very similar sequence then made it into "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes." Here, Jessica Fletcher attends a rehearsal for a mystery play and works out the solution despite having to leave before the denouement. Both sequences are useful shorthand to give a sense of the lead character (and detective), and as *The Mirror Crack'd* had been seen by at least some of the key creative personnel behind *Murder, She Wrote* it seems likely to be either an unconscious cribbing or deliberate homage to the earlier screen mystery. The spectacle of Miss Marple watching a film propels her into more contemporary environs (the film is set in the 1950s), while Jessica watching what seems to be a rather clichéd stage mystery makes her seem old-fashioned; the characters are both moving towards some sort of middle ground between nostalgia and the present day.

"The Murder of Sherlock Holmes" (even the title indicates that this is a series that understands its literary debt) certainly adopts the Agatha Christie approach of ensuring that the least likely person committed the crime. In Agatha Christie, this was achieved with a stunning effect in her 1926 masterpiece *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), in which it is revealed that detective Hercule Poirot's neighbour, investigating companion and indeed the book's narrator, Dr Sheppard, committed the titular killing. In *Murder, She Wrote*, Jessica Fletcher's publisher, friend and potential new lover Preston Giles is the murderer. The impact of this reveal is deadened a little for audiences who are

already familiar with the show and perhaps only caught this opening episode in reruns. The knowledge that Preston will not become a regular nor even recurring character robs the twist of much of its effect; when he does reappear once more, in the seventh season episode "The Return of Preston Giles," he becomes the victim of murder. When Jessica kisses Preston in this first appearance, the 1984 audience may have reasonably expected this to be the beginning of a new relationship, just as 1926 readers of *Ackroyd* may have expected Dr Sheppard to be an ongoing replacement for Captain Hastings, who had narrated most of the earlier Poirot mysteries. However, as Philippa Gates argues, successful fictional female detectives have tended to be classed as either too young (Nancy Drew) or too old (Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher) for traditional romantic relationships, "and thus elude the complications that arise when career and romance compete" (Gates 2011: 4).

"It's a Dog's Life" is the fifth episode of *Murder, She Wrote* and is a particularly clear example of some of the tropes and expectations of a traditional Agatha Christie mystery making it to the series. Most obviously, it borrows iconography that many may associate with the English countryside, which, in turn, has an association with Agatha Christie. The story includes a wealthy family living on a large country estate in the state of Virginia, whose hobbies include fox hunting in the traditional garb. These equestrian events lead to murder, with an initial hint of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story, "Silver Blaze." When the characters are better established, it is clear that they share the same feuding ways (generally over money) that can be seen in so many of Christie's tales, such as *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938) and *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953). The idea of an extended family congregating under one roof just in time for murder was an Agatha Christie staple established in her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1921), and although country houses figured less often than some may assume, she nevertheless returned to them again and again. Christie defended the use of the location in interviews, and Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick argue in favour of the setting: "The isolated house filled with family, guests, and servants is the ideal setting for the unexpected. […] Automatically, the choice of a country house insures maximum space, interesting personae, and intriguing complications" (Maida & Spornick 1982: 180).

Even though most viewers of *Murder, She Wrote* are unlikely to have direct experience of large wealthy families meeting up with dramatic, and fatal, consequences, this is exactly the sort of scenario that feels familiar because it is so recognisable from Christie's stories. In Maida and Spornick's Christie analysis (called *Murder, She Wrote*, although it predated the series by two years), they argue that "Christie immerses the readers in another world with its own geography, its special lifestyle and rituals" (1982: 170). But if this setting can be transferred to the United States so easily, then how "English" was it to begin with? Christopher Yiannitsaros suggests that the key here is that the people and events seen in these country houses are full of nuance, and so are not the clichés we may imagine. For him, "Christie's articulation of the 'hollowness' of faded empires and their symbolic refraction through English country houses,

when read alongside her playing with fears of miscegenation in *Dumb Witness* and the subversive English comedy of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, suggest that Christie is, in fact, anything but the paragon of English national identity that she has come to represent." Yiannitsaros emphasises the crucial timing of Christie's works, spanning 1920 to 1976: "Emerging in the historical period that witnessed the death of England's imperial power, Christie's fiction demonstrates an emphatic resistance to the representation of England as 'Land of Hope and Glory' […] Christie's fiction thus needs to be situated within an intellectual trajectory different from its usual cozy frame of reference" (2017: 87). Yiannitsaros's mention of *Dumb Witness* (1937) is a reminder of another Christie connection here: the anthropomorphic dog who witnesses a murder, and may have played a part in the crime. This has been the subject of some ridicule for both Christie and *Murder, She Wrote*.

As Stuart Barnett points out, "The country house, then, is not simply one of many possible quintessentially English symbols. It is fraught with the weight of unresolved history. As such, it raises issues of politics, ideology and class-allegiance in relation to anyone who interacts with it or makes use of it. […] The country house in Christie changes over time and serves ultimately as a seismograph to trace social and historical change." Indeed, as Barnett concludes, "the country house also comes in for a critique that is far from nostalgic at the hands of Christie" (Barnett 2016: 63). And yet, this sort of critique is often absent from screen adaptations. This stripping out of politics and comment cannot be said to apply to all screen treatments of Christie by any means, but there is certainly an extent to which explicit statements about British society are dialled down in screen treatments that tend to emphasise the puzzle mystery and the historical visuals (perhaps forgetting that Christie wrote contemporary fiction, and very rarely set her stories in the past). Similarly, when *Murder, She Wrote* brings murder to the country house, there is no questioning of the situation that has enabled such extreme wealth, nor the potentially problematic presumption from some that money is designed to trickle down the family tree, regardless of any individual's work ethic (somewhat at odds with the American dream, at least as envisaged by some). The sense that the episode barely even takes place in a recognisable America is cemented by the fact that Jessica's closest ally is her cousin, played by the English actress Lynn Redgrave (using her native accent). Later in the series, we will witness Lansbury's unforgettable turn as Emma MacGill, another cousin (who is a broad cockney).

Elsewhere in the first season of *Murder, She Wrote*, the series tackles formulae that Christie honed over several decades. In the second episode, "Deadly Lady," we meet a fractious yet also close-knit family who have witnessed what may be a murder, and just as Christie wrote in *The Hollow* (1946), there may be more to the testimonies of this family unit. In *The Hollow*, the murder victim is shot in apparently plain sight at the side of a swimming pool, which then helps to conceal the evidence. For *Murder, She Wrote*, the potential murder occurs out at sea, far from the sight of the viewer and

residents of Cabot Cove, but easily overseen by the victim's family. Jessica gets the chance to investigate physical clues, such as the imprint of a watch on the wrist of a stranger, but like Miss Marple, she reminds us that she is not a part of the police, even though her reputation already precedes her, just like Miss Marple. This is made evident when, unusually for the series, Jessica is angry about the murder of a man she hardly knew. While this may be emotionally logical, a long-running series that concerns itself with murder cannot afford to draw attention to the real human cost to its lead character, and in future Jessica mostly restricts herself to momentary shock, just as often happened with Miss Marple, unless she had a particularly close personal connection with the deceased.

The most Christie-like story in this first season is undoubtedly "Murder Takes the Bus," which has often been highly rated by fans. Tim Benzie, who hosts *Solve-Along-A-Murder-She-Wrote* events, ran a poll to find the fans' favourite episode, and told Jenny Hammerton that "I'm proud to say I predicted 'Murder Takes the Bus' would win from the very first week. The episode is presented in a classic Agatha Christie closed-room style, has an ingenious resolution and some corking guest stars" (Hammerton 2022: 49). Here, it is the mechanics of the mystery that encourage comparisons with Christie. In the episode, a group of people who are mostly strangers to each other are travelling together by bus, including Jessica alongside Cabot Cove's sheriff, Amos Tupper. The bus is forced to stop, perhaps because of a mechanical issue, and the passengers must disembark and take refuge at an isolated diner until it can be repaired. Predictably, a murder soon occurs as a recently released convict is found dead in his passenger seat, with a screwdriver protruding from his body. Already, comparisons can be made with Christie's two best-known mysteries: *And Then There Were None* (1939), in which ten people are stranded on an island and murdered one by one, and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), in which passengers on the titular train are trapped in a snowdrift following the murder of a man on board.

The broken-down bus serves the same function as the stranded Orient Express, and Chris Ewers has pointed out the way that the broken transport in the middle of (seemingly) nowhere affects the story: "When the snow freeze-frames the Orient Express, it also obliterates the outside world, blanking out any normative sense of landscape and place" (Ewers 2016: 103). This also works for the isolated island in *And Then There Were None* as well as the nondescript diner in "Murder Takes the Bus." The episode pivots upon the discovery of the body, as passengers are now forced to communicate with each other. Officially, Sheriff Tupper takes the lead before the local police arrive; just as Glenwood Irons and Joan Warthling Roberts say of Miss Marple, Jessica needs "the backing of men to be effective" (Irons & Roberts 1995: 67), even if we know that she is the one who is really in charge. Jessica is so central to the mystery that she even discovers the body, and there is little attempt to pretend that this is a crime best left for the local police to investigate. Instead, it is a puzzle to be solved, just as in the detective-less *And Then There Were None*,

where potential victims are forced to try and solve the case before it's too late (unsuccessfully, in the original novel).

Characters in *Murder, She Wrote* are well-aware of this cliché, notably the librarian Miriam Radford (played by Rue McClanahan) who exclaims: "Do you mean to tell me we're stuck here with that killer on the loose? Why he'll just probably kill us all one by one." This was not an unreasonable expectation, especially from a character whose knowledge of crime fiction was strong enough that she recognises an obscure and valuable first edition book. Miriam also seems to understand that she isn't in a cosy-ish Miss Marple adventure; instead, she is stuck in a working-class location with a group of potentially dangerous strangers, unlike the quiet murder of St Mary Mead, where fellow villagers are chief suspects. Maida and Spornick argue that "The social environment is Christie's chief interest," (1982: 171) and the mixing together of characters allows this to be an important part of "Murder Takes the Bus," even if the United States has a less ingrained class structure than England. The different backgrounds of these characters forced together by circumstance engenders suspicion among them. At one point, Sheriff Tupper wonders about the secret identity of one of them, which may also mark them out as a murderer: "Which one of these fellas is it? Is it the mailman or the college professor? The sea captain?" The passengers are a microcosm of society, which encourages the audience to be swayed by their own prejudices and expectations, only for them to be subverted, just as often happened in Christie's works.

Agatha Christie was hardly the first author to embrace a career that was more varied than they have subsequently been given credit for, and the first season of *Murder, She Wrote* in particular embraces a similar variety of approaches to crime fiction. While the first two episodes are reasonably traditional whodunnits, with the crimes taken seriously, things take a turn for the comedic in the third instalment, "Birds of a Feather." In this episode, Jessica visits her niece Victoria, only for her fiancé Howard to come under suspicion for murder. Before the murder can be solved, the answer to another riddle is needed: exactly where does Howard go at night? The truth, we learn, is that he is a female impersonator at a swanky nightclub, and the sight of actor Jeff Conaway (best known as macho Kenickie in the 1978 film *Grease*) being escorted through a bustling police station in make-up and a dress is unsubtly mined for comedic effect. This episode also sees some unsteady steps towards defining Jessica's character. Her decidedly old-fashioned addressing of Victoria and Howard as "children" is certainly more Miss Marple than Jessica Fletcher. And yet, the way in which Jessica forces herself into the investigation shows a growing confidence since the opening of the first episode. While Miss Marple was not shy of making her point, she would certainly have stopped short of Jessica's near-blackmailing of the investigating lieutenant in order to be a part of the case. By now, Jessica is already an expert in police procedure and forensics, and ready to be deployed for any murder case. In fact, like Miss Marple, after these first few appearances her character changes very little, despite the time that passes.

Agatha Christie's 1967 novel *Endless Night* (1967) has been described by Christie scholar J.C. Bernthal as "an outlier in the Christie canon" (2022: 160), and the same can be said of "Lovers and Other Killers" when it comes to *Murder, She Wrote*. Both stories concentrate on a complex young man whose approach to love and life are at least enough to disturb some of those he meets, and could potentially lead to murder, despite his charming outward appearance. Bernthal goes on to say that although *Endless Night* "provides genre-tested twists, it is more intensely and straightforwardly psychological, and deals more explicitly with the psychopathy of a serial killer" (2022: 160). In this novel, the lead character (and narrator) is young man Michael Rogers, who charms many of the people he meets (particularly women), but is viewed with suspicion by others, especially when his young rich wife is killed in unusual circumstances. This character outline is similar to David Tolliver in "Lovers and Other Killers," a university student whose charm flatters older women in particular, including Jessica, who is also disturbed by some of his overfamiliar tendencies. The audience is alert to this, as Lansbury makes Jessica's uneasiness clear when David lets himself into her hotel room; she does not comment on his use of "Jess" when he addresses her, but the audience will surely note it. David becomes embroiled in the murder of an older woman, with whom he had been having some sort of relationship.

Unusually for the series, this initial murder is resolved in an extraordinarily cursory fashion, through a single reference to an unseen and unnamed character ("a three-time loser who was on parole. He gave a complete confession."), although there will be another death for Jessica to investigate and solve. Indeed, the murders are not really the main point of interest in either story; instead, it is the character interplay and psychology. In *Endless Night*, it isn't even clear what the mystery is or may be for much of the time; there are mentions of a curse, and various spooky goings-on, but the structure does not allow for the usual detection of crime, not least because the murder occurs so late. Similarly, it is the truth of David Tolliver's character that is the most intriguing aspect of "Lovers and Other Killers." Jessica cannot work out if he is really telling the truth when he insists "I can't explain it, but I find myself drawn to mature women," having earlier flirted with her when at dinner. Although Jessica rejects his advances, the principle of the character being attractive to men is an example of the series breaking free of Miss Marple's eternal spinsterdom, and presenting a lead character more in line with what is seen on network television; namely, one with an ability to nurture a love life, should they so wish. In the end, the audience does not have an answer when it comes to David. When Jessica suggests he may become a character in one of her books, he asks "What would I be… a victim, a suspect, killer?" Jessica confesses that "I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet" before the picture freezes on a final close-up of David, with an inscrutable but menacing expression, as she begins her journey back to Maine.

Endless Night was one of Christie's later novels, and is sometimes cited as her final masterpiece, and it indicates how she moved with the times. Like

Murder, She Wrote, there was sometimes an awkward compromise between reflecting the present day and using the formulae that had become so well-loved by murder mystery fans. York argues that Christie was

> a person of great intelligence and aware that the world was changing. She knew that in some ways it was changing for the better – notably in the diminution of class and gender prejudice – and she knew that even when change was unwelcome it nevertheless imposed on the individual the need to adapt to it. Her novels, if they mark the persistence of an unchanging structure of crime and detection, also mark a constant concern to live in the present, even if that means an alien present.
>
> (2007: 6–7)

Both Christie and *Murder, She Wrote* explored the modern world while retaining a sense of the familiar; Jessica Fletcher's move into Virtual Reality (in "A Virtual Murder") may have become a comical meme online, but it is not really so different from Miss Marple's considering how her village had been changed by the arrival of a post-war housing estate. Certainly, the village background is important to both sleuths as it can inform their detection; even when Jessica moves to New York, she regularly strays from the city. The village setting is an essential part of their lives, and when questions are raised about Cabot Cove's founder in "Joshua Peabody Died Here… Possibly" it sends the same ripples of chock through the town that a murder at a village's manor house may inspire.

The occasional flash of love interest for Jessica Fletcher was just one way that the character was often afforded more characterisation in this regard than Christie allowed Miss Marple. Indeed, Christie was little interested in Miss Marple beyond what she had to do to solve each mystery; she told one correspondent that she had never even thought about Miss Marple's childhood. However, in *Murder, She Wrote* we are given occasional glimpses into the life of Jessica before the series began. This includes "The Last Flight of the Dixie Damsel," in which she learns more than she would like about her late husband's past (at least, so she is led to believe). Both Miss Marple and Jessica are also afforded a small group of recurring (but not regular) friends, who appear when needed and can often find themselves embroiled in murder; both are particularly close to their nephews, although Miss Marple's Raymond West is luckier in love than Grady Fletcher.

And so this chapter could go on, highlighting parallels between the worlds of Agatha Christie and *Murder, She Wrote*. An entire book could be written on the subject, but it is important to highlight the fact that any similarities (coincidental or deliberate) do not mean that *Murder, She Wrote* should be viewed as some weak interpretation of pre-existing works. *Murder, She Wrote* is indisputably its own programme, with its own identity, helped in large part by Angela Lansbury's star turn as Jessica Fletcher. If Jessica boards a ship on which there is a murder, such as in "My Johnny Lies Over the Ocean," then this should not

be automatically perceived as a new take on Christie's *Death on the Nile*. (1937) But the series does exist in the same world of influences, and just as Christie borrowed from Conan Doyle at times, so *Murder, She Wrote* helped to reinforce the fact that Christie's canon is certainly the most well-read and popular example of mystery writing. The character of Jessica Fletcher may have been influenced by both the author and her creations, but she was no replacement. Even the series itself acknowledged the debt but also the differences in its final episode, "Death by Demographics." When a radio presenter describes Jessica as "the first lady of mystery writing," she implores him to be careful: "Agatha Christie's ghost may strike you dead!" Even after twelve seasons and over 250 episodes, Jessica Fletcher still couldn't quite shake off the comparison.

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12 Death in Plastic

A Ludonarrative Analysis of *Murder, She Wrote: The Game* and *Murder on Madison Avenue*

Marco Arnaudo

An influential 2009 article by Hocking introduced the term "ludonarrative" to the field of game studies, and it gave scholars the impulse to interrogate the intersections of gamic and narrative functions within a playable artifact. In Hocking's article, the ludonarrative approach uncovered a dissonance in the video game *Bioshock* "between what it is about as a story, and what it is about as a game" (255). On the other hand, the ludonarrative approach can equally be employed to describe or promote expressive harmony "as a synchronization between mechanics and narrative that create a consistent and realized experience of story" (Despain – Ash 1).

While ludonarrative analysis was pioneered originally by video game scholars, it can be applied to analog games too. Wallis operated within this framework when he noted that in *Clue*, "not only can you win by proving that you committed the crime, you can accuse yourself and be wrong, and will lose the game as a result. As a game mechanic this works, but in story and genre terms it is a tale told by an idiot" (70). Also, while ludonarrative analysis has tended to focus on the presence of story elements in games, the process can be extended to a consideration of gamic elements in fiction, like in Zweig's *Chess Story* (1941) or Bolaño's *The Third Reich* (1989, featuring a board game of the same name).

In the present essay, I offer a bidirectional ludonarrative analysis of two games related to the crime drama *Murder, She Wrote* (Universal, 1984–1996). The first item is the board game *Murder, She Wrote*, developed and published by Warren Games in 1985; the second is the fictional board game *Murder Will Out!* that Jessica Fletcher is hired to design in the episode *Murder on Madison Avenue* (8.22, 1992). These two case studies will offer an opportunity to demonstrate the kind of insights that can be gained by looking at intermedia artifacts such as these in a perspective that combines narratology and game studies.

Both games I discuss fall under the category of paratextual games, that is, games that are explicitly based on preexisting narratives, and whose experience of play is significantly colored by the relationship between the game and its fictional source (Lancaster; Booth; Jones). Games of this kind go back at least to *Il laberinto dell'Ariosto* (*Ariosto's Maze*), a board game that was played

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in the European courts of the Baroque era. The game was based on the epic poem *Orlando furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*) by Ludovico Ariosto, and it was described in detail by Emanuele Tesauro, a leading literary figure at the time. Tesauro explained that the board featured a single track with play spaces associated with famous locales and events from the book. Each player would use a miniature representing a major character in the story, and players would alternate rolling dice and advancing their character along the track. Mechanically speaking, the game is a simple roll-an-move, but its experience of gameplay was enhanced by the unpredictable combination of narrative elements, which offered the group the opportunity for witty comments, jokes, puns, and short narratives (55). From this description, *Ariosto's Maze* seems to anticipate the ability of modern paratextual games to recuperate and recombine materials from a preexisting fictional universe (Lancaster 104).

In the process, *Ariosto's Maze* shows the leading trend that will shape paratextual games all the way until the early 21st century, including our games about and from *Murder, She Wrote*. Just like *Ariosto's Maze*, most paratextual games have tended to be random roll-and-move or spin-and-move games with some elements from the source attached to the components. So powerful has been the dominance of games based on random movement, that in 1999 game designer and historian David Parlett wrote that "the modern boardgame industry may with little exaggeration be said to be built on the back of Goose" (100). Paratextual games of this kind, just like *Ariosto's Maze*, delegate to the players the creation of a narrative from the provided game components. Their mechanics, per se, do very little to foster storytelling. If anything, random movement tends to create ludonarrative dissonance by failing to portray the way sentient beings operate (when was the last time a businessperson went bankrupt for staying at a hotel *against their will*, like it may happen in *Monopoly*?).

Traditional conventions of gaming can also clash with the conventions of fiction in other ways. For example, a story may feature a unique element that a game will have to inexplicably multiply to make it available to every player. A narrative based on cooperation may equally be twisted when turned into a competitive game. Both issues are exemplified by *The Lord of the Rings Adventure Game* (1978), in which all members of the Fellowship will happily backstab each other in order to win, and the One Ring is turned into several rings so that each player can try to drop one in the Cracks of Doom!

The 1984 *The A-Team* board game is an even more relevant point of comparison because, having been released just one year before the *Murder, She Wrote* board game and being based on a TV show, it exemplifies the same historical context of our case study. While the soldiers of fortune in *The A-Team* show tend to work for common people in need (especially in the first four seasons), the protagonists in the board game have been hired by an "internationally renowned company" to retrieve the stolen formula of a soft drink. To do so, they randomly roll-and-move to infiltrate the island fortress of "a crafty madman". The game betrays the focus on camaraderie of the TV show by

positing a single winner (the player who leaves the fortress with the formula), by requiring that players battle each other when they land on the same space, and by allowing the play of cards to hinder the others' efforts. One can see that the design combined the conventions of mass-market games (competitive spirit and random movement) with a clumsily pasted-on theme.

This superficial and dissonant kind of paratextuality has traditionally dominated games based on fiction. Major game makers like Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley regularly adopted the formula above whenever they released a game based on a preexisting narrative. Starting from the second half of the 20th century, mass-market game companies shifted the emphasis of their paratextual games from literature and comics to more broadly appealing media like film and TV. Precisely because of the generalist circulation of their designs, producers of mass-market games came to vastly shape the perception of board games as products that come in long thin boxes, have short rulesets, rely on cheap components like plastic pawns and paper money, are based on random movement, and have an inaccurate and mainly cosmetic connection to their theme. Mass-market games also tend to be proprietary, meaning that they are presented to the public as if the publisher itself was the creator and not a mediator between designer(s) and players. Consequently, most mass-market games either conceal the name of the designers(s) or feature them only in the rulebook or on the back of the box.

Things started moving in a different direction in the hobby market of the 1970s, but the impact of these innovations was not yet felt in the general population at the time of our case study. In the 1970s, hobby publishers like Avalon Hill, SPI, TSR, Games Workshop, and countless smaller ones, started to create games that attempted to capture the atmosphere, plot points, and storyworld of their fictional sources (Arnaudo). The trade-off was always that the more accurate was the representation, the more complex the game became, and therefore the smaller and more specialized was the audience. The American publisher Mayfair, before striking gold with the publication of *Catan* in the 1990s, created a brand name for themselves precisely by specializing in the publication of games based on literary fiction. Their first foray in this field was *Sanctuary* (1982, from Robert Asprin's storyworld), and it was followed by games such as *The Company War* (1983, from C. J. Cherryh's *Downbelow Station*), *The Forever War* (1983, from Joe Haldeman), *Barbara Cartland: A Romance Boardgame* (1985), and the comics-based *The ElfQuest Boardgame* (1986) and *Lone Wolf and Cub Game* (1989). The final game in this line was *Xanth*, based on Piers Anthony's works and published in 1991, the year before *Murder on Madison Avenue*. These games came in smaller boxes than most mass-market games had, relied on cardboard more than plastic, and were geared toward the fans of the original works. Mayfair's literary games featured the name of the original writer and/or the title of the book series on the box cover but revealed the identity of the game designer(s) only in the rulebook inside. Several of these games also featured authorial endorsements such as "Mayfair has made every effort to accurately portray my novel. This is the

authorized game" (C. J. Cherryh on the box of *The Company War*). Creating games that were faithful to their source was a marked departure from the practices of the mass market. The very idea of seeking the authors' endorsements was significant, even though the authors' involvement with the design and development must have been limited or non-existent (or they would have been listed in the rulebook as designers).

Such was the market and culture for paratextual games at the time of the game *Murder, She Wrote* and the episode *Murder on Madison Avenue*. It was a culture in which mass-market publishers dominated the scene with ludonarratively dissonant products, while a smaller hobby market strove for accurate representation and recruited the support of writers for promotional purposes.

In 1985, Warren Company published the game *Murder, She Wrote*. Several things are striking about this publication, first among them the date. The TV show *Murder, She Wrote* had started airing only the year before, and it is therefore likely that its development had already begun at the time of the first season. Warren was a young company that was trying to establish itself through timely franchise-based games, as evidenced by a 1983 game about *My Little Pony* (the franchise is from 1981) and a 1984 game about *Transformers* (the same year in which the toys and the cartoons were first released). Somebody at Warren must have quickly understood the potential of the *Murder, She Wrote* show and managed to negotiate a license early on. Despite being a small company that would go on to publish only a dozen of games, Warren was clearly attempting to break into the mass market, as evidenced not only by their high-profile topics but also by their aligning with conventions such as the use of long thin boxes, the reliance on plastic components, short rules printed inside the box lid, and the concealment of the identity of the designer(s). A second edition of the game was published in England by Paul Lamond Games in 1991, just a year before the airing of *Murder on Madison Avenue*. This new version sported the same rules as the original, but replaced the original illustrations on the board, tokens, and cards with photographs.

What is original in the *Murder, She Wrote* game is the unusual degree of commitment to the project in terms of game design. While the game still features a roll-and-move core mechanic (as it was unavoidable to connect with a general audience), it also surrounds it with a system that encourages actual deduction. Most originally, the game introduces an element of asymmetry that was not common in mass-market games. In *Clue*, for example, a player may be said to be the murderer, but as we have seen from Wallis' comments, this factor is irrelevant in terms of gameplay. All players in *Clue* still have the goal of identifying the identity of the murderer, whether that corresponds to their character or not. In the *Murder, She Wrote* game, the player who is secretly a murderer must act like it. Their task is to murder five non-playing characters and to reach an "escape" space, while all other players are trying to figure out the identity of the murderer.

This was an original idea at the time, especially in a game conceived for the mass market. As a consequence, it limits the number of players to a minimum

of four (or the murderer couldn't hide among the others) and requires somewhat cumbersome procedures. During preparation, for example, a token with the label "alive" is placed face down next to the nine non-playing characters printed on the board. Players then draw small cardboard tiles (referred to in the rules as "cards") to determine which of them is the murderer and which ones are Jessica. (Ludonarrative dissonance makes a cameo appearance here, because at least three players will be, somehow, Jessica, and a further player will be a murderer disguising as Jessica!) Next, all players leave the room and take turns going back in one at a time. When they do so, the Jessica players will simply sit next to the board for a bit, but the murderer will replace one of the "alive" token with a "dead" one, effectively committing the first murder. This done, the game can finally start.

The game is set on an unnamed island resort in some unspecified English-speaking country. The choice of a place other than iconic Cabot Cove may seem surprising to modern fans of the show, but it is very understandable for a game released in 1985. The design must have been developed at the time of the first season of *Murder, She Wrote*, and by then Cabot Cove was an underdefined and secondary element of the show. In the first season, only two episodes take place primarily in Cabot Cove (1.03, 1.08), two partially in it (1.04, 1.10), and one shows the town only in the opening sequence (1.20). Notable residents like Seth Hazlitt, Eve Simpson, Harry Pierce, mayor Sam Booth, deputies Floyd and Broom, or recurring elements like Loretta's Beauty Parlor and the lore of Joshua Peabody, had not been introduced yet. The focus of the show has always been that Jessica solves murders while she travels and, from season 8, during her stays in New York. At the time of season 1, the showrunners had not yet invested into making Jessica's hometown a center of interest too. In choosing a setting other than Cabot Cove, the designer(s) of the board game captured the appropriate setting for the early storyworld of *Murder, She Wrote*. This setting may also be a homage to the island-based novel *Evil under the Sun* (1941) by Agatha Christie, and therefore to the tradition of the Golden Age mystery that is a main source of inspiration for the TV show.

The board of the game depicts touristic locations such as the hotel, the boat house, the golf club, and the spa. These places are connected to each other by paths of yellow spaces that the players travel by rolling six-sided dice and moving their pawns by the exact number that was rolled. As typical of roll-and-move games, the variance in the outcomes can be significant (from 2 to 12), and it is entirely possible to be slowed down to a crawl due to low result or to be forced to overshoot a location due to a high roll. While regular travel spaces are presented by yellow squares and rectangles, spaces associated with the characters take the form of yellow circles. When players land on one of these spaces, they can interact with the corresponding "alive" / "dead" token. First, they look at the token, then they put it back in the box and select another one to place face down back on the same spot. The Jessica players, after looking at a token and learning the character's status, must replace it with a token of the same type (alive for alive, dead for dead). The murderer player,

after looking at an "alive" token, may choose to replace it with a "dead" one, committing another murder. The murderer can also decide to keep the character alive to divert suspicion. Obviously, no one cannot replace a "dead" token with an "alive" one.

After interacting with an "alive" / "dead" token, the player visiting a location must place a plastic ring of their own color on an associated track of white circular spaces showing ordinal labels such as "6th", "5th", "4th", and so on, until "last in". In this way, a public record is created of which players visited which characters and in what order.

The purpose of the swapping of tokens is to give the murderer a chance to kill their victims, while the purpose of the order tracks is to help the Jessica players figure out the identity of the culprit. Suppose that I visited Penelope Rumford at the tennis club and verified that she was alive. Later, I come back to the same location, look at the token, and find out that Penelope has been murdered. Looking at the order track, I see that only Red and Yellow stopped by the location since I last was there, and that tells me that one of them must be the murderer who swapped the token.

It should be clear by this description that the *Murder, She Wrote* game runs on considerably more involved procedures than most mass-market games. Warren could have gotten away with a run-of-the-mill, generic roll-and-move game with some art from the TV show on it, like *The A-Team* board game had done. Instead, they attempted to create something that had an original personality, fostered actual deduction, and encouraged bluffing. Accordingly, the game has received considerable praise in the forums of the website BoardGameGeek, the main existing source of information about board games. This is remarkable because BoardGameGeek tends to attract committed hobby players who have usually little patience with the average mass-market game. Yet, when the users of the site compare the *Murder, She Wrote* game with the natural competitor of *Clue*, they regularly say that they prefer *Murder, She Wrote*. And while the users point out some of the game's outdated elements (like random movement), there is a nearly universal agreement on the solidity of the design and the originality of its game mechanics. Having played the game myself, I concur with the chorus. This is a game that looks like a mass-market game in every aspect of its production while also playing like a light-weight hobby game. On the other hand, the very traits that make the game appealing to hobby players may have limited its circulation among the generalist and casual audience for which it was intended.

But if the game holds up mechanically, how does it fare from the ludonarrative point of view? The thematic and gamic elements are clearly designed to converge into a playable mystery story, and one that specifically purports to embody the spirit of the early *Murder, She Wrote* show. In that department, the game is lacking. First, it suffers from common ludonarrative shortcomings such as random movement of sentient beings and the "cloning" of a unique element into multiple copies (the Jessicas). The game also features a surreal situation in which people walk around an idyllic island resort, find the bodies

of multiple murder victims, and quietly keep that fact for themselves. The game is competitive and there is no advantage in sharing information about the murders (that would only help others), but the resulting situation is one of peculiar discretion bordering on criminal negligence. On the plus side, the game gives players incentives and goals that push them to act as their own character (the murderer tries to get away with murder and the detectives investigate), especially vis-à-vis the precedent of *Clue*, where an amnesiac murderer may act like a detective too.

As a ludonarrative rendition of the TV show *Murder, She Wrote*, the game is even less successful. In terms of genre, it mirrors the show only in the general sense that it is a mystery in which some people are murdered and some other investigate. The number of players (four to six) places the number of suspects between three and five (because a Jessica player would not suspect themselves), which is narrower than the number of potential culprits in a typical episode of the TV show. A setting other than Cabot Cove is faithful, as we saw, but the selection of an unnamed locale is not, because Jessica usually travels to famous and/or well-defined places (in season 1, only the setting of 1.16 is unstated).

What separates most decidedly the game from the show is the body count. To win, the murderer must eliminate five local residents, and if they manage to do so, they turn the pleasant puzzle of the TV show into a gorefest worthy of a slasher movie. Even an incompetent murderer will often eliminate at least three locals before getting caught, which is still a significant departure from the source. The game also opens with a murder, which is a rare occurrence in the show, where most murders take place toward the middle of the episode. Finally, the game may end with the serial killer getting away without being captured, which obviously jars with one of the most fundamental premises of the show.

When looking at the different layers of the design, we can assess that the game is a solid ludic product, a flawed serial killer story, and a failed rendition of the TV show *Murder, She Wrote*. Remarkably, though, the game may have offered some ideas to *Murder on Madison Avenue* (8.22, 1992).

In this episode, Jessica Fletcher is invited to design a game called *Murder Will Out!* for the fictional Marathon Company. Marathon's business is in toys, and no one in the episode ever refers to it as anything other than a toy company. This gives us the sense of a company like Mattel, with a major involvement in the toy field and a secondary interest in games, especially if based on simple concepts like *Uno* or on major media franchises. In the year 1991 which preceded the airing of *Murder on Madison Avenue*, for example, Mattel's game releases included a game about the movie *Hook*, a game about Barbie, new versions of *Memory* and *UNO*, and the toy-heavy *Dark World*, known for its massive plastic production. In that year, Mattel produced a single game by an established game designer, *Mandarin* by Tom Kremer, who was only credited on the back of the box.

In the episode in question, however, Marathon is interested in working on a literary franchise and in giving Jessica Fletcher full credit on the front of the

box, as we can see from the prototype of the game at the end of the episode. In this, the fictional company Marathon does not fit the parameters of the game industry of the time. It combines the high visibility and large circulation of a massive toy company like Mattel with an interest in literary themes and the endorsement from a writer that was typical of Mayfair's operations. Even Mayfair, as we saw, specialized in games based primarily on fantasy and sci-fi, and their only mystery-based game was *Ellery Queen* (1986). Meanwhile, the most popular mystery writers of the 1980s were not hired to co-create games based on their works. That a celebrity writer like Jessica Fletcher is offered this opportunity is necessary for the episode to exist, but it is also a creative license.

Whether the writers of the episode were aware of this or not, the dichotomy between the Mattel / Mayfair approaches is embodied in the episode by the two major characters of Meredith Delaney (played by Barbara Babcock) and Edgar Greenstreet (played by John Hillerman).

Executive vice president Meredith Delaney represents the mentality of franchise-based mass-market publishers (Mattel style), in which repurposing a famous source is more important than ensuring the quality or accuracy of the design. Delaney is unconcerned by Jessica's lack of background in game design, and due to power struggles within the company, she even forbids Jessica from working with veteran designer Edgar Greenstreet. Delaney must understand that an inexperienced designer like Jessica could not come up with a competent game all by herself, and her injunction demonstrates that her goal is strictly to print Jessica's name on the box.

In her pursuit of cost-efficient practices, Delaney ends up in frequent contrast with Edgar Greenstreet. Greenstreet, for the most part, is portrayed as a toy creator rather than a game designer. This aspect is clearly communicated by his high-security workshop littered with machines, toy parts, ridable mini-trains, robots, and the animatronic of a cowboy (Pistol Pete, played by Danny Woodburn), with no stacks of classic or modern board games in sight. Greenstreet also seems to be experienced in merchandise-based toys, as evidenced by the presence in his workshop of a robot reminiscent of *Star Wars*' R2-D2, and by a mask he wears that makes him look like Borg-assimilated Picard (from a storyline in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that aired just two years prior). All these elements frame him as a typical toy designer for the mass market.

Peculiarly, though, Greenstreet is also committed to authenticity in his creations, and he often steers other resident designers in directions that put quality and accuracy before cost. It is precisely Greenstreet's purist approach that leads him to meet with Jessica to discuss her ideas about her game. This seems to be very much the Mayfair way of doing paratextual games, as it is driven by engagement with the vision of the author. Greenstreet, like the designers at Mayfair in the 1980s and early 1990s, understands that Jessica is not a game designer, and he is eager to lend his professional expertise to the creation of a game that would capture the spirit of her work.

Jessica, meanwhile, is being Jessica: committed, passionate, meticulous, curious, and open-minded. She is aware of her inexperience, but she is willing

to learn from the experts, as evidenced by her meetings with Greenstreet and with the advertiser Brian Singer (played by David Lansbury), in the hope that he may lend some insights too. Be it a movie (1.05), an audiobook (3.22), or a puppet show (12.17), Jessica always takes an active interest in the quality of the products associated with her name, and a board game is no exception.

Which leads us to address *Murder Will Out!* directly. What kind of game is it, or, more precisely, is projected to be? How might it play? What kind of experience might it trigger? While the creators of the episode may not have put much thought into these elements in the script, *Murder Will Out!* is still a thematic element in the storyworld of the TV show, and an examination of this fictional design can therefore enrich our understanding of the episode. It can even cast new light on related elements such as the relationship between Jessica and Edgar Greenstreet, as we will see.

We can glean the kind of game Jessica and Edgar are working on mainly from three scenes in the episode: two are conversations between the two characters, and the last is the presentation of the prototype at the end.

The first conversation about the game takes place during Jessica's initial meeting with Edgar in his workshop. In that occasion, they discuss the notes that Jessica had previously sent him, showing once more that Jessica takes the project seriously and had already put some thought into it. After Edgar shares the idea that toys can sublimate our violent tendencies ("you can even commit murder and go to bed with an easy conscience"), the two brainstorm ideas from Jessica's notes. The resulting exchange is worth reporting in its entirely:

EDG: I think you'll want six players, not five. I had in mind a grumpy neighbor, call him Snipes.
JES: He snoops a lot, you know, looks in windows, picks up clues…
EDG: Snipe's a snoop. [laughs] We'll make them out of plastic. People can feel them, touch them, have their favorite colors.
JES: And they would move with the roll of the dice.
EDG: Draw to see who the murderer is.
JES: And the squares on the board will give the players an opportunity to pick up a motive card, like a scene of the crime card or a clue card.
EDG: Which may or may not be genuine.
JES: Oh, you mean a false clue. Like a wild card in Poker. This is just wonderful, it really is.

While this conversation may sound like a free exchange of ideas, an understanding of the game culture behind it us allows us to see further meanings in it. Jessica and Edgar talk to each other as friendly equals, but the relationship between them is not so. The main difference is that the ideas proposed by Jessica show her lack of experience in the field. In the twelve seasons of *Murder, She Wrote*, we never get the sense that Jessica includes board gaming among her recurring hobbies. Maybe she played *Clue* or *Candyland* with young

Grady or Victoria? Jessica's lack of familiarity with tabletop games transpires in the fact that, in the conversation above, she simply repurposes very generic concepts from *Clue*, like the ideas of moving by rolling dice and gaining clues from cards. The only "twist" (and it is a very modest one) is that the clue cards seem intended to go on the board rather than in the players' hand. When Edgar talks about a character in the game, that is what Jessica immediately latches onto, because fictional personalities and backgrounds are her trade as a writer.

Meanwhile, Edgar's apparently extemporaneous ideas are much more inventive and seem to point to a specific design he may already have in mind. Such design overlaps with the *Murder, She Wrote* board game in two important regards: it plays with up to six players, and you "draw to see who the murderer is". This last bit is a marked departure from the obvious model of *Clue*, and it closely mirrors the setup of the *Murder, She Wrote* game, in which players draw tiles to assign the role of the murderer. Like the *Murder, She Wrote* game, the design Edgar is subliminally pushing on Jessica is one in which the murderer is one of the players. This also allows the projected *Murder Will Out!* to function as a metaphor for the TV show *Murder, She Wrote*, in which indeed one of the "players" will turn out to be a murderer.

Edgar's following comment that some clue cards may not be genuine is even more original and unusual, and it has no parallel in the *Murder, She Wrote* game or in *Clue*. These are *modular* mystery games, in which the elements of the solution are created by repositioning game components ("dead" / "alive" tokens in the former, cards in the envelop in the latter). When that is the case, the idea that a clue may not be genuine is physically impossible. Looking at a "dead" / "alive" token in the *Murder, She Wrote* game or a card in *Clue* will always be a reliable source of information. It makes sense that Jessica looks surprised by this suggestion, because as a casual player or a non-player of games she is not likely to have seen this idea before.

A mechanism to incorporate unreliable clues in mystery board games did exist by this time. It was pioneered in the game *221b Baker St* (1975) and further developed in *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* (1982), *Eagle Eye Agency* (1982), and *Gumshoe* (1985), which all featured *scripted*, not modular clues. That means that each game came with a casebook containing several fixed scenarios. Each scenario describes a specific case in narrative form and has a section with short narratives that describe the content of each location. If one visits the morgue, for example, one reads a description about what can be learned there, and when visiting the house of a suspect one can read a conversation with that character. While the locations on the board remain the same, the texts associated with each change from scenario to scenario. Each scenario of a scripted mystery game functions like a short story whose textual sections can be accessed by reaching the corresponding areas on the board.

In this style of board game, and in this style only, one could execute Edgar's idea that some of the clues collected by the players may be false. While staring at a "dead" token in the *Murder, She Wrote* game will never change its meaning, nothing prevents a scripted mystery game from presenting a misleading

testimony that will be proven false by a comparison with other elements. Every narrative trick that mystery writers present in their stories can be included in a board game of this kind, including a clue "which may or may not be genuine". It is fascinating to imagine that Edgar may be thinking of a potential game of this kind. Incidentally, it would be precisely in a scripted mystery game that the design could truly render the storyworld of Jessica Fletcher's novels, precisely like *221B Baker St* and *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* do for the works of Conan Doyle.

A caveat is in order, though. Modular and scripted solutions in a mystery game are incompatible. If you have one, you can't have the other. Which also means that Edgar's suggestions in this conversation are mutually exclusive: if you "draw to see who the murderer is", then you can't have clues "which may or may not be genuine". It is not by chance if all scripted mystery games mentioned above feature non-playing characters as culprits. Their guilt, their story, their lies, and all clues leading to the truth, are already inscribed in the scenarios before the players even pick up the game.

This contradiction is worth acknowledging, but it should not trouble us too much in terms of story. This conversation between Edgar and Jessica happens at the beginning of the cooperation between the two. Maybe Edgar is sounding out ideas he himself is not sure about. Maybe he is mentioning different things on purpose, to see what Jessica will best respond to. And she does seem to be intrigued by the possibility that some clues may not be genuine, even though she may not know how to include that in a game.

Toward the end of the episode, Edgar and Jessica stand in front of a giant version of what appears to be the planned board for *Murder Will Out!*. The graphics of the illustration and the general composition are very advanced, which is quite a stunning feat for a game they started discussing just some days before.

The look of the board also seems to indicate that the person(s) who built the prop took inspiration from the board of the 1985 *Murder, She Wrote* game (not the photo-based 1991 version). The prototype giant board of *Murder Will Out!* shows named locations such as the sheriff's office, the town hall, or the mill, and both the hand-drawn style and the coloration follow the style of the original game. Those buildings are connected to each other by winding paths of square spaces, some of which are showed to have large white circles in them. As we saw earlier, while there are white circular spaces on the board of the *Murder, She Wrote* game, they are not meant for movement but to record the order in which players visited each location. The person(s) who built the prop board must have used only the look of the board as reference, and not the ruleset, mistaking the white circles as movement spaces. Yet, this error confirms that the source for the prop was indeed the 1985 game, and not some generic idea of a fictional town, which would not have needed yellow squares and white circles in its movement paths.

The conversation that takes place in front of the board confirms that the design of the game has not moved past the initial exchange between Jessica

and Edgar. In particular, the incompatible copresence of modular and scripted elements is still present. When Jessica appears to be accusing Edgar of murder, he says: "You're saying I've drawn the murderer's card", which makes one think that *Murder Will Out!* features a randomly selected player as the culprit, like in the *Murder, She Wrote* game. Yet, when wanting to see what Jessica means, Edgar says: "Draw a scene of the crime card and tell the other players what it says". Without missing a beat, Jessica pretends to draw a card out of thin air and proceeds to "read" it by describing what might have happened the night of the murder. This procedure makes perfect sense in a scripted game, especially a cooperative one like *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective*, in which players do read the content of textual sections to the entire group. It is true that in the scripted games of the 1980s, the text of the scenes was printed in booklets, not on cards, but having cards with the text of a scene is certainly conceivable. The 2015 mystery game *Holmes & Watson* (2015) uses the method of presenting its scripts on cards, for example, showing that that could have been done in *Murder Will Out!* too. In a modular mystery games like *Murder, She Wrote* and *Clue*, on the other hand, there is simply no elaborate text to read, and if there was, there would be no incentive to read it out loud to give information to the other players.

Toward the end of the conversation, Jessica says: "There's a card that's been left out, Mr. Greenstreet", to which Edgar replies "The wild card?". Jessica responds to that by describing the possibility that Edgar has been deceiving everyone about the nature of his next project. This description confirms that *Murder Will Out!* is designed to include at least a card that presents false information, and that that information takes the form of a short but detailed narrative. At the end of the scene, we are left with the impression that at this stage of development *Murder Will Out!* still features the contradiction between a randomly selected culprit and a complex scripted narrative inscribed in the game.

The final hints about the nature of the game come from the box of the prototype presented to Jessica at the end of the episode. This is a thin, panorama type box, as was common for mass-market games at the time. It features a generic background in solid yellow, the title *Murder Will Out!*, the subtitle "You solve the crime! Based on the works of J. B. Fletcher", six cartoonish characters, and a set of cards with the indications "mmm…", "scene of the crime", "wild card", "clue n. 1", and "clue n. 2".

Clearly, within the temporal parameters of the episode, no proper playtesting of the game has been done. What's in that box must be a very rough prototype, probably just a set of components cobbled together from the ideas brainstormed by Jessica and Edgar. And yet, the fact that Jessica accepts the prototype means that those ideas and those components must reflect her plans for the game to a large extent, because that is just how punctilious Jessica is about her work.

Most obviously, the six characters on the cover come from Edgar's initial suggestion, which Jessica had immediately accepted. The cards "scene of the

crime" and "wild card" also refer to ideas specifically discussed in the two conversations. They seem to prove that ultimately Jessica and Edgar settled for a scripted mystery. A card that only says "scene of the crime" offers no indication about the contents of the scene of the crime per se. But a "scene of the crime" card would work perfectly if the player who reveals it were to turn to a section of a casebook called "scene of the crime" and read the corresponding description. Even the "wild card" could work if the players were instructed to read a script that may contain some inaccurate information, and if it was left to them to identify what the inaccuracies may be.

We can therefore imagine the *Murder Will Out!* prototype as a scripted mystery game in which the cards we see on the box cover are used to point to specific sections of a casebook. These cards could be shuffled face down during setup and placed on spaces representing buildings of a small town, as per the giant prop board. The players would take turns rolling dice and moving on the board. They would pick up cards as they land on them (following Jessica's initial idea), and then turn to a scripted sourcebook in which they would read descriptions "which may or may not be genuine" (like Edgar proposed). The idea that you "draw to see who the murderer is" would need to be dropped, but we already knew that not all ideas initially discussed by Jessica and Edgar could end up in the final product. Ultimately, this design for *Murder Will Out!* is the one that best ties together the indications about the game in the episode with the game culture of the time.

Nor would the process of development end there. As we mentioned above, a lot of playtesting would still need to be done. Just because Jessica and Edgar are satisfied with their initial ideas, it doesn't follow that players will be too. Game design is a highly iterative process, and in the words of game designer Liz Spain, "games have to be ground up and torn apart by wolves and put back together several times before they reach kind of a form that is as good as you can make them" (from the documentary *The Game Designers*, minute 47).

If this is true for any game, the process presents further wrinkles in the storyworld of *Murder, She Wrote*. The prototype of *Murder Will Out!* will be developed after Jessica is back to her usual routine and possibly not even by Edgar himself but by one of the nameless designers he oversees. We also get the sense that Edgar is more interested in the big ideas than in the minutiae of development. This is evidenced by the fact that at some point he was involved in the design of a game called *Waffles*, but failed to realize that it was renamed *Pancake Man* in the final production. We can't therefore hypothesize how many of the original ideas by Edgar and Jessica will end up in the final game. We do not even know if *Murder Will Out!* will retain its name. By the time sheriff Metzger can buy a copy to play with Adele, it may even be called *Murder, She Wrote*.

What we do know is that by using game studies and game history to analyze the process that led to the prototype of *Murder Will Out!*, the relationship between Jessica and Edgar can be seen in a more precise and detailed perspective. It is thanks to that background that we can appreciate the role of Jessica

as a willing learner who starts with very little to offer and ends up giving a significant contribution to the process. It is especially Edgar's character that is enriched in this light. When seen against the background of the game culture of the time, Edgar comes across as a truly complex character. He works for a giant toy-oriented company but still values creativity, authenticity, and personal connections. If he is to oversee a game based on the works of an author, he needs to know the person and he needs to work with and for that author. He towers over Jessica in knowledge about games and yet his only goal is to figure out a way for Jessica's ideas to become an engaging design. He wants her to feel valued and heard, but he also knows that he would do her a disservice by indulging her initial suggestions. Yet he doesn't strike those down but finds an angle that can make them more original and interesting. He comes up with solutions such as a scripted mystery game, which Jessica had never heard of, but he does so because that is a good way of expanding on her prompt and make a game that is truly about her works. Delaney only cared about having Jessica' name on the box; Edgar wants Jessica's creative vision inside that box. In the process, he comes across as a remarkable mentor. Such insights about this character's mind and personality are the kind of contributions that a ludonarrative analysis can offer.

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13 Re-watching *Murder, She Wrote*

An Auto-Ethnographic Exploration of Queer Fandom and Race

Nina Trivedi

I formed a ritual of comfort watching televised reruns of *Murder, She Wrote* while writing my Ph.D., an endeavour characterised by extensive periods of quiet anxiety and solitary writing. Time spent at home writing was punctuated by breaks dedicated to the comfort of viewing this program. *Murder, She Wrote* reruns throughout the day, and afternoon afforded me the opportunity to strategically schedule my writing breaks. The act of comfort watching served as a source of reassurance during this time in my life. The television shows or films that we repetitively watch stand steadfastly by our side, offering a crucial respite from the real world, and supply us with a much-needed infusion of joy. Engaging in the act of "comfort viewing," a practice often synonymous with the terms "comfort show" or "comfort movie," can provide us with a profound sense of solace and can help to alleviate anxiety. Willens (2013), as underscored by Wheeler (2015), referred to the communal aspect of binge-watching, highlighting the concept of "binge-bonding" to articulate the para-social interactions formed when viewing our favourite television programmes. This term encapsulates the phenomenon whereby the emotional responses engendered by such viewing experiences, are extended to, and built upon by interactions with colleagues and/or friends.

I recall the initial airing of *Murder, She Wrote* in the 1980s and 1990s coinciding with my burgeoning awareness of the prevailing influence of whiteness within the media cultural milieu of Reagan/Bush era America. This awareness prompted a contemplative exploration, leading me to interrogate the potential formulation of a nuanced and multifaceted definition of the American experience aligned with my own identity as a first-generation child of immigrants. During the early phases of the show's airing, I found myself contending with the normative structures associated with the whiteness embedded in American societal norms, as depicted on T.V. My simultaneous weariness and intrigue emanated from the recognition of my divergence from this normative construct. I am interested in the role of whiteness, in both its invisibility, its visibility, and its connection to American culture and identity. Critical Whiteness Studies, a field of scholarship that emerged from Critical Race Studies, historically drew on the writing of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Nella Larsen, and others during its academisation in the U.S. from the 1980s onwards.[1]

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Scholarship and writing focusing on an American framework of the social construction of Whiteness have been significant for me in bringing to light an understanding of its impact on American culture and forms of American identity. This field of study considers the invisible and visible structures that pave the way for white supremacy and white privilege and explores the question of identity.

Artist and scholar Shawn Michelle Smith writes that "[t]he intersection of visual culture studies and critical studies of race opens up important ways to understand the cultural specificity of looking and of race as a visual cultural dynamic" (Smith, 2014). About this intersection, Smith also states that she aims for these theories to "[…] move the discussion of race and the visual beyond an assessment of representations to consider questions about looking and the ways in which looking produces racialized viewers, not simply racialized objects of view" (Smith, 2014).

Gingham tablecloths, close knit communities, cable knit sweaters, typewriters, Maine coastal paths, cozy kitchens full of copper wall hangings, objects, and products of comfort, eliciting American-ness, eliciting comfort, recollections of watching T.V., comfort in watching, remembering home. My re-watching of *Murder, She Wrote* with a critical framework that considers the intersecting dynamics of whiteness and queer fandoms yields a distinct perspective and analysis, providing me with a different way of looking at and seeing the show.

The sociological perspective and framework that the construct of whiteness and, moreover, the invisibility of whiteness, offers can illuminate how it functions in *Murder, She Wrote*. The invisibility of whiteness is then a critical tool that confronts the ways in which the white spaces of the worlds that occupy *Murder, She Wrote* are critically analysed as non-racialised in the way they are presented in the show. The narratives and scripts, as well as the sets, that constitute the show can be read via this lens, hinting at the hidden markers of whiteness in society.

New Orleans, as a city, has featured in several episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*. I will focus on three specific episodes, "Murder to a Jazz Beat" (season 1, episode 12, 1985), "Judge Not" (season 8, episode 6, 1991), and "Big Easy Murder" (season 12, episode 4, 1995), to track the progression of narrative and character arcs in the show. New York City has also featured in several episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*. I will focus on three specific episodes, "Bite the Big Apple" (season 8, episode 1, 1991), "Time to Die" (season 10, episode 16) 1994, and "Death Goes Double Platinum" (season 12, episode 13, 1996), to similarly track the progression of narrative and character arcs in the show.

This chapter also explores spaces for fans of colour in navigating the whiteness of queer fandom, through examining the inclusion and support structures located within British queer fandom culture associated with, *Murder, She Wrote*. Queer fandom associated with *Murder, She Wrote* can be a space that embraces the imbrication of the intersectional identities. I weave together

three strands: an autoethnography of my personal fandom of the show stemming from "comfort watching"; a critical reflection of the UK-based fan event, Solve-A-Long- Murder- She-Wrote; and a media analysis of specific episodes of the show through the lens of whiteness. *Murder, She Wrote* has both resonated with and posed challenges to its queer viewers, and I will analyse key episodes, fan discourse, the broader cultural context, and complexities of this long-running series and its reception within the queer community.

Each genre of fandom possesses a distinct ecosystem or infrastructure, with variations in the social culture that defines these spaces. Fandom involves a performative aspect, encompassing the desire for connection and identification with characters and archetypes in television shows. This affords individuals the opportunity to vicariously live out fantasies and emotions, thereby providing a source of joy, safety, comfort, and collective engagement. Acknowledging joy derived from a shared experience fosters a sense of community, as the commonality of appreciating the same content creates a space where acceptance and connection can endure.

Fandom studies, being an interdisciplinary field, harnesses insights from various disciplines such as visual culture, material culture, sociology, anthropology, and media studies. In *Fandom as Methodology: A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers*, the authors write about the convergence of art and fandom with a focus on creative writing that can emerge as a part of "[…] fannish practices such as letter writing and fan fiction" (Grant and Love, 2019, p. 3). The practices outlined in the book explore both online and offline fandoms, and the connection of the two is emphasised. This provides a framework for conceptualising emancipatory domains within fandoms that actively endorse principles of anti-racism and inclusivity. My research interest lies in integrating auto-ethnographic writing as a tool in the examination of fandom. Working with autoethnographic methodologies in my own research has unearthed the intricate intersections that make up my own positionality.

Autoethnography encourages the integration of personal experiences and reflective insights to unveil nuanced dimensions within broader cultural occurrences. The appeal of this approach is particularly evident among scholars within the realm of fan studies, wherein there is a pronounced commitment to eroding the conventional demarcation between researcher and subject. Fandom Studies scholar, Rukmini Pande writes, "Autoethnography is clearly a powerful tool to chart the complex positions that fan researchers must negotiate during their research" (Pande, 2018, p. 135). To what extent does the ethical stance adopted by the researcher, involving obligations to both investigated spaces and participants, intersect with the simultaneous responsibility to highlight inherent power differentials within the research inquiry?

Fandom Studies scholars such as Pande and Henry Jenkins have asserted that engagement with fandom becomes an inherently political act for individuals belonging to marginalised racial groups. Pande in her recent publications, *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices Fandom and Culture* (2020) and *Squee From The Margins: Fandom and Race Fandom and Culture*

(2018) provides rigorous exploration into the multifaceted ways in which racial identity, power dynamics, and intersect within fandoms. Shedding light on the complex interplay between cultural identity and political agency in this context, she has remarked, "At the present moment, race is rarely taken into account when discussing aspects of fan identity" (Pande, 2020). Pande (2020) continues, "[…] This problematically reinforces whiteness both as default and as neutral in fandom spaces[…]. In this context, the move towards naming whiteness can be a radical choice, as it forces both researchers and respondents to reckon with difficult questions regarding systemic patterns of erasure within fan communities."

Because much of fandoms operate in digital spaces, much progressive and challenging writing about the intersections of race and fandom can be found online or on blogs. In a 2022 *Teen Vogue* article titled, "On White Queer Fandoms and Erasure of Fans of Color," the author, Stitch (2022), argues, "To fandom at large, we're destroying fandom by daring to point out the ways it fails and erases us in the process of portraying the spaces as a queer utopia." They go on to comment,

> Ultimately, we shouldn't have to choose between our queerness or our identity as people of color. In fandom, where we're actively positioned with our identities as diametrically opposed and *not* intersectional, we're often offered up choices. We're given the choice of inhabiting a queer space, surrounded by other queer fans, *or* trying to have a space that recognizes our identities as people of color from all over the world. Queer fandom tells us that we can't be both queer and people of color. But that separation doesn't exist in the lived realities of queer fans of color.
>
> (Stitch, 2022)

The article concludes, "[…] queer fandom should be for all queer fans, celebrating all the nuances of our identities and encouraging each other to collectively build something that transgresses the mainstream, something intersectional and actively anti-racist" (Stitch, 2022).

Murder, She Wrote has garnered a devoted fanbase over the years. The character of Jessica Fletcher, portrayed by Angela Lansbury, is an intelligent, confident, and independent woman who defies societal norms, presenting a compelling narrative for queer audiences. Christopher Ali (2022) in his fan account of *Murder, She Wrote* posits that his declaration of fandom for the T.V show parallels the emancipatory experience of coming out. He reflects on his personal journey, revealing that he initially "came out" as a fan of *Murder, She Wrote* before publicly acknowledging his sexual orientation. This admission as a fan of the show symbolises the first instance in which he acknowledged his divergence from societal norms. Ali found comfort in openly embracing his unconventional teenage affinity for a show featuring a senior citizen solving crimes, highlighting the powerful role that fandom can play in shaping identity. Lansbury has been cited as saying, "I'm very proud of the fact that I am a

gay icon" (Watson, 2022). There are subtle undercurrents of queerness within the show, which, although almost imperceptible, have impacted fans.[2]

Alexander Doty's, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, explores the prelude to the emergence of openly gay or lesbian characters in media narratives, delving into the nuanced terrain of queer readings of characters in the antecedent landscape. Doty (1993) cites the T.V. shows *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–1983) and *Designing Women* (1986–1993). I argue that Jessica Fletcher can be read as queer, in the bell hooks definition of the term: " 'Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (hooks, 2014). A 2015 article referring to Lansbury's divergence from societal norms notes, "[…] she demonstrated the prowess of an older woman, who like a gay man, may not be the sexual object of the straight male mainstream" (Rimalower, 2015). The character of Jessica Fletcher disrupts traditional gender roles and provides a space for queer identification.

Fletcher is not explicitly portrayed as queer, but the portrayal of her characteristics (defying normative gender stereotypes) can resonate with individuals who may not conform to traditional norms, providing a more inclusive space for identification. Ahmed's (2006) work explores the phenomenology of queer experience, examining how orientations and spatial dimensions influence identity formation. Her focus on lived experiences contributes to a wider understanding of queer identification. Jack Halberstam's "Female Masculinity" (1998) challenges traditional gender binaries, exploring the concept of female masculinity. This contributes to discussions on the diversity of gender expressions and its implications for queer identification. These scholars, among others, have played crucial roles in shaping the academic discourse around queer identification, offering theoretical frameworks and insights that have influenced interdisciplinary studies of gender, sexuality, and identity.

In my interview with Tim Benzie (2023) from the fan event, "Solve-Along-A-Murder-She Wrote," in which the audience participates in a quiz and trivia about an episode that is screened, Benzie notes the queer fanbase of the show and the representation of queerness in the show. Benzie and I discussed the atmosphere of 1980s network American television and the reluctance to portray or depict a character as openly gay. For example, Tony award winning actor, playwright, and gay rights activist Harvey Firestein features in Episode 5 of Season 9, *The Dead File*, as a cartoonist; however, his queerness is not referred to in the episode. Benzie commented, "For me as a kid growing up, if they didn't say it, it wasn't real […] it wasn't enough that someone was camp. I needed someone to say – I'm gay and here is my girlfriend or boyfriend."

While *Murder, She Wrote* may have held appeal for its queer audience, it also featured problematic representations of queer characters. Benzie spoke about episode 2 of season 1, "Birds of a Feather," set in San Francisco, as the first episode he featured in his Solve- A- Long show. Benzie comments, "It's sort

of like they had written a gay episode of *Murder, She Wrote* and then wiped it all clean, it's bizarre." Benzie recounts the episode in which actor Jeff Conaway who was known for his role as Kenickie in the film *Grease* (1978), plays the fiancé of Victoria, the niece of Jessica Fletcher. Victoria believes he is having an affair, and during the episode, we learn that he is employed by a drag bar to perform as a woman. There are no gay characters in the episode as outlined by Benzie. There is an extended scene of Victoria and her fiancé passionately kissing, as if to reassure the audience of their heterosexuality. The fiancé is arrested while dressed in drag, and at the police station, a young Black man in the station says, "Hey, do you want a date?" to which the fiancé says, "No" and walks past. Benzie commented,

> I stop the show at this scene and say, this is the actor Nick Savage from Friday the 13th Part 3, and other films. This was only the second episode of *Murder, She Wrote*, and I think this makes him the first and possibly only gay character in *Murder, She Wrote* and the first Black gay character and the first Black actor to get a line in a *Murder, She Wrote* episode. We all have a round of applause for the actor, to celebrate this actor, who may be otherwise unheralded.

About the queer codes in the episode, Benzie noted, "[they] aren't fulfilled by anyone being gay." The codes include pink flamingos, a reference to a production of *Charley's Aunt*, a famous farce about a man dressing up as a woman, and the title of the episode, *Birds of a Feather* is the American title of *La Cages Aux Folles* (1978), which was a successful foreign language film about drag queens and a gay couple.[3] Benzie remarks that he thinks there is more potential to read a character as queer as the show progressed into the 1990s.[4] Benzie commented, "*Murder, She Wrote* is camp and gay men do feel invited to it and by the same token it would be very easy to watch it as a conservative republican or Christian and still like the same show. It's kind of like Dolly Parton, how she appeals to gay men and conservatives and the show sits uneasily or happily between this."

There is an intricate interplay between queerness, representation, and societal norms in Lansbury's roles, particularly in the context of Broadway. There is a broader landscape of gay fandom surrounding her theatrical productions. For example, Lansbury credited her status in the gay community to the lead role in Broadway's, *Mame* (1966). In an interview (Kelleher, 2022), she commented, "Everything about *Mame* coincided with every young man's idea of beauty and glory and it was lovely." Spanning Hollywood films, her collaborations with fellow gay icons, such as Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet* (1944) and Judy Garland in *The Harvey Girls* (1946), were also beloved by a queer fanbase. Lansbury's close ties with the gay community in Hollywood since her arrival to the studio system in the 1940s, manifested through her friendships, activism, and acknowledgment of her status as a gay icon, further elucidating the intersection of her career and personal values.

It is worth exploring Lansbury's family background, with a focus on her grandfather George Lansbury, a political and social justice activist, and her father Edgar Lansbury, a political figure and activist. The family's commitment to social, cultural, and political activism, as exemplified by George Lansbury's establishment of the *Daily Herald* (1911) and later Lansbury's *Labour Weekly* (1925), underscores Angela Lansbury's roots in a milieu of activism and advocacy for equality. Archival material of George Lansbury's writing and speeches can be found at London's Bishopsgate Institute. Through the lens of Angela Lansbury's career and family history, one can understand the rich tapestry of activism that shaped Lansbury's worldview and contributed to her standing as a revered figure within queer communities. Lansbury fundraised for AIDS research and patient care, supporting the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR) and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. Lansbury also supported colleagues and actors by having them guest star on *Murder, She Wrote*, in order to fulfil Screen Actors Guild medical coverage for annual earnings requirements.

By simultaneously identifying with and critically questioning *Murder, She Wrote*, queer viewers navigate the show's limitations regarding queer representation. Fan discourse, both online and offline, plays a crucial role in this process. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" is a key theoretical framework in queer theory, cultural studies, and performance studies (1999). Disidentification helps us understand how fans of *Murder, She Wrote* engage with the series. Muñoz's idea encourages us to explore how fans embrace, reinterpret, or subvert the show's narrative to make it more inclusive and reflective of their own experiences. Disidentification can be read as a strategy that helps to navigate and resist dominant cultural norms and expectations. Muñoz writes,

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.
>
> (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31)

Disidentification can help us to think about mainstream representations and the balance between appropriating and subverting cultural symbols, creating a space for alternative meanings and interpretations.

In the inaugural season of *Murder, She Wrote*, "Murder to a Jazz Beat" unfolds as Jessica Fletcher visits New Orleans for the first time.[5] She comments on how she is unaccustomed to jazz outside of concert halls. Notably,

the managerial and anchor roles are predominantly held by white characters, while the jazz ensemble and its immediate circle feature actors of colour, primarily Black actors.[6] Within *Murder, She Wrote*, narratives and scripts can be explored for the role that whiteness plays in them. AnnLouise Keating, in the article "Interrogating "Whiteness," (De) Constructing Race"(1995, p. 905), notes that the "invisible omnipresence gives 'whiteness' a rarely acknowledged position of dominance and power." This invisible omnipresence is overtly, and sometimes not overtly, part of *Murder, She Wrote*. A sense of the normativity of the dominance of whiteness becomes reinforced in situations in which people of colour are absent in the settings of the schools, bars, public spaces, homes, workplaces, and churches, as seen in episodes in earlier seasons of the show and then problematically utilised as stereotypical focal points in other later seasons.[7]

The inaugural episode of the eighth season, titled "Bite the Big Apple," marks a significant paradigm shift as Jessica Fletcher relocates to New York City. This season endeavours to introduce more intricate and inclusive character and narrative arcs, albeit grappling with the pitfalls of perpetuating stereotypes. The narrative commences in Cabot Cove, where Jessica's friends host a surprise farewell party. Her open door symbolically underscores her departure, with anticipations about the necessity of door locking in New York echoed by guests attending her surprise going away party. Jessica, on a temporary move, assumes a role as a criminology course instructor at Manhattan University, and she expresses her intention to engage with "inner-city schools periodically." Her Manhattan residence, deemed secure by her remarks to friends in Cabot Cove, contrasts sharply with ensuing scenes of police sirens and traffic, emphasising the perceived dangers of the urban setting. However, the broader cultural diversity remains limited, with predominantly white main characters and minimal representation, apart from the doorman and the building's painters in this episode. There are no substantial speaking roles for characters from underrepresented backgrounds in this episode.[8]

When the invisibility of whiteness manifests within *Murder, She Wrote*, it carves out a space of normativity that is not only exclusive but also assumes a norm. In *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics and Culture*, authors and editors Vron Ware and Les Black, examine the "[…] ways in which whiteness is brought into being as a normative structure, a discourse of power, and a form of identity" (Vron Ware and Les Black, 2002, p. 13). They aim to examine the internal structures and symbolism of whiteness without allowing its reification, hoping that this method will enable various applications of theories to extend the ways in which whiteness is examined in various cultural contexts. The role of whiteness in the differing social contexts that *Murder, She Wrote* constitutes opens up the possibility of a wider critique that considers whether it makes itself aware of these contexts or not.

"Judge Not" brings Jessica Fletcher back to New Orleans. The beginning of the episode sees a character tell her mother-in-law that she has been volunteering alongside Jessica Fletcher for the United Negro College Fund

(UNCF).[9] The UNCF was aimed at increasing opportunities and scholarships for African American college graduates, and this may be a way for the show to signpost to the audience a broader social awareness within the narrative.[10]

In "Time to Die," Fletcher speaks with her criminology students in New York about emotional responses and character development. Perhaps this is another signpost to the audience indicating the show aims to take these things more into account in this season moving forward, particularly in reference to the inclusion in this episode of Black and Latino/a characters, including from within the criminology class. This signifies a departure from the earlier episodes, featuring more complex dialogues and storylines. This notable shift in the representation is in contrast to the predominantly white cast in "Bite the Big Apple." A perceptible advancement in the series is marked with actors of colour assuming more senior roles with substantive dialogue such as detectives, sergeants, or principals.[11]

The episode "Big Easy Murder" opens with stereotypical references to New Orleans' cultural stereotypes. The show perpetuates common tropes of voodoo rituals, including crude dolls and sacrifices. The episode relies on these certain cultural stereotypes, raising questions about its portrayal of New Orleans as a city marked, as noted by a character in the episode, "[.] by voodoo, illegal gambling, and jazz."[12]

Nancy Tuana's essay, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," underscores the broader ethical considerations of environmental disasters, emphasising racialised and environmental justice. Tuana wrote about how racial and social divisions played a crucial role in determining who bore the brunt of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans, and who had the resources to recover more quickly. She wrote about porosity as a metaphor for these divisions and how they proliferated in post-Katrina New Orleans. Tuana writes,

> There is a viscous porosity of flesh–my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types–skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediator of interaction.
>
> (Tuana, 2008, pp. 199–200)

In the final seasons of *Murder, She Wrote*, there is a discernible shift towards casts in episodes that predominantly feature actors of colour. In "Death Goes Double Platinum," in the twelfth and final season of the show, the character of Amy Ortega, a white woman married to a Latino lead singer and piano player, introduces a complex dynamic. When asked about why Jessica is helping the character of Luis, Amy's husband and band leader, Jessica says, "[…] he's helping me to put a little Latin flavour in a story I am writing and I am helping him with his grammar at university." In this episode, we have witnessed

Luis speaking fluent English. Arguably, the idea of "inserting Latin flavour" is contrary to purposeful inclusion. These references raise questions about the authenticity of inclusion. Amy's dialogue with Jessica Fletcher includes racially insensitive remarks and prompt reflection on the show's historical engagement with characters of diverse backgrounds.[13]

In this context, considering Dylan Robinson's insights in *Hungry Listening, Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* is helpful in understanding the variations between representation and meaningful inclusion. Robinson (2020, p. 6) writes about "[.] redefining the structures of inclusion," questioning whether representational politics truly address structural inequalities. In this episode, Amy's remarks underscore how cursory representation and not inclusion with the aim of equity can inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes on the show.

The first "Solve-Along- A-Murder-She Wrote," in 2018, was at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, and it created a space that allowed the audience to engage with their fandom of the show by learning trivia about the episode. This included information about guest stars, and the audience worked on solving the murder featured in the episode alongside utilising various props including a cardboard face of Jessica Fletcher glued on a popsicle stick that was places on audience seats in small party bags. Gifts were presented for correct answers, and commercials from the time period in which the episode was aired played during breaks. Benzie spoke with me about the ways in which the Royal Vauxhall Tavern functions as a safer space for many people, for queer people and for queer people of colour. Benzie referred to specific episodes, that for their racial insensitivity, would not be screened in his event including, "Night of the Tarantula," and the jazzy ones." He commented, "I am acutely aware of unhelpful stereotypes in the episodes. There is an episode with Bruce Jenner and I won't screen that because it excludes and marginalises Trans people, and I want everyone to feel like they are invited to the party, everyone is welcome here to enjoy this." The Solve-A-Long event was then produced for the Prince Charles cinema, which has a history of screening Sing- A- Long films, including being home of the Sing- A- Long Sound of Music event that inspired Benzie. We spoke about the demographics of the fan event. He noted,

> The demographics are broadly this: varying from shows, the audience is 60 - 70 percent white straight women between the ages of 25-50, 10 percent gay men and 10 percent 70 year old plus people, 10 percent younger people between the ages of 19-20, because in the UK in your first year of university you watch daytime T.V. and this is when the show is on during T.V. reruns.

He observed the presence of individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds at the event, and in my observation, approximately 5 percent of the audience comprised people of colour.

I have a complex relationship to *Murder, She Wrote*, but I ultimately love being a fan of it. I often come back to bell hooks' ideas about "collective participation" and what it means to "engage in acts of recognition with one another" (hooks, 1994). To me, this is the power of fandoms. bell hooks' *All About Love* (1999) explores how love is central to ideas surrounding liberation, and the book contends with how class, race, and gender are facets of our identities that are interconnected. Expanding the multifaceted dimensions of love and examining its varied intersections with both personal and political realms is a central theme of the book. hooks writes, "Contemplating the practice of love in everyday life, thinking about how we love and what is needed for ours to become a culture where love's sacred presence can be felt everywhere, I wrote this meditation." In the context of hooks' work, the spheres of the professional and personal, as well as the dichotomy between the individual and the community, are open to exploration through the lens of love—a conceptual framework put forward as a radical, emancipatory force, or method. It is with this in mind that I approach fandom, and my study of *Murder, She Wrote*.

Notes

1 Prominent writers and scholars who have examined the role of whiteness and who have contributed to my analysis of the wider field of Critical Race Studies include Les Black, Richard Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Michael Omi, David Roediger, Hortense Spillers, Vron Ware, and Howard Winant. In addition, Arun Saldanha has written on geographies of Whiteness. See: Arun Saldanha, Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
2 Indicative of her wider pop cultural impact, Lansbury's character of Jessica Fletcher is often referred to in the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, with RuPaul saying the catchphrase: "Murder She Sat Down and She Wrote."
3 The stage adaptation was written by Harvey Fierstein.
4 For example, in Episode 15 of Season 9, 1993's *The Petrified Florist*.
5 Accompanied by Jonathan Hawley, a news anchor played by Clive Revill, Jessica explores the city's jazz scene in the French Quarter. Jonathan comments about New Orleans saying that it is a "Cajun paradise, […] the cradle of jazz' and he outlines the city's connection to Paris and to France. A jazz ensemble, led by Ben Coleman (Glynn Turman), features Stan Shaw as Eddie Walters. Fletcher attends a performance of the Ben Coleman quintet, only to witness the shocking death of Coleman mid-concert, due to poisoning. A pivotal moment arises when the televised death sparks a debate on its appropriateness for evening news. Jonathan Hawley resigns from his anchoring role, leaving the stage to another anchor for the coverage.
6 With Garrett Morris portraying Lafayette Duquesne, Jessica's enthusiastic taxi driver. The wife of Ben Coleman, Callie Coleman, is played by actress Olivia Cole, who reappears in all three of the episodes referred to here, in New Orleans, as different characters. The Perfect Foil, Season 2 of Episode 21 portrays a mainly white cast and I omit it from the trilogy noted in this chapter for this reason.
7 For an analysis of social settings and the exclusion of people of colour see: Elijah Anderson, "The White Space," Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, 1:1 (2015), 10–21.
8 As Jessica reassures her Cabot Cove acquaintances about her move to New York, a dialogue ensues regarding safety in the city, in which her close friend, Seth Hazlitt,

emphasizes statistics on violence against women. This dialogue is juxtaposed with a subsequent scene depicting a murder in the building's parking lot, reinforcing the notion of the urban environment as hazardous. The character of Ahmed Shankar, the doorman played by Andrew Johnson, whose performance stands out as one of the few South Asian characters in the show. Johnson would go on to feature in four episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*. "Curse of the Daanav" episode 4 in season 14 includes a particular stereotypical character.

9 The character of Melinda Coop portrayed by Oliva Cole, who was first seen in *Murder to a Jazz Beat* as Callie,

10 Olivia Cole's consistent presence across episodes may underscore the show's inclusivity and support for Black and PoC actors in Hollywood. Cole was best known for her roles in Roots and many stage and television shows. Note here about Lansbury and hiring actors in order to help them fulfil requirements of SAG benefits.

11 At an anti-graffiti rally, actor Stan Shaw, introduced in Murder to a Jazz Beat from season 1, reappears as Detective Sergeant Vince Lofton.

12 Interestingly, Jessica enquires about her friend Callie, who may be Callie from Murder to a Jazz Beat. In this episode, there are references to a Goula ruins visit on St. John's Eve, as promised by her friend Callie. Olivia Cole returns, playing Yvette Dauphin, a maid in a prominent New Orleans family home. The portrayal of Vera, a young woman who works in what Jessica Fletcher refers to as a curio shop, is only seen wearing a mix of Ghanaian and Nigerian fabrics, the only character in the episode to do so.

13 "Indian Giver" in season 4, episode 10, "Night of the Coyote" in season 9, episode 6, and "Northern Explosion" in season 10, episode 11 all feature racial and cultural stereotypes.

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