
Nicola Barfoot. *Frauenkrimi/polar féminin. Generic Expectations and the Reception of Recent French and German Crime Novels by Women*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007. 227p.

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Nicola Barfoot's reception study seeks to fill a gap in the scholarship on French and German crime novels written by women. While such novels, which often feature female investigators and an overt feminist outlook, began to appear in the United States in the early 1980s, a comparable development did not occur in Germany until the late 1980s and in France until the mid to late 1990s. By the same token, numerous studies addressing the woman detective in Anglo-Saxon crime fiction exist but the same cannot be said for scholarship written in English on French and German crime novels, although a small body of recent scholarship is not included in the bibliography here. Barfoot proposes to read such novels "as part of an international phenomenon of feminist revisions of the crime genre" (9). In addition, the author aims to pursue not only the question of feminist politics but also the issue of reception in specific national contexts. Barfoot considers the discourses engendered in the varied body of reviews as "evidence of a publicly sanctioned way of reading and responding to texts" (10). In a brief historical overview, Barfoot proposes the appearance of Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone in the United States as providing the initial impetus for a new wave of female detectives. More and more such figures, both amateur and professional, both heterosexual and lesbian, soon followed. In 1986, Paretsky founded the association "Sisters in Crime" in order to combat misperceptions and discrimination against women in the field of mystery. As a result of these developments, authors as well as scholars became involved in lively debates about the genre of the crime novel and the possibility of a feminist re-appropriation of a commercially successful genre long dominated by male authors, editors, and publishers. In attempting to account for the genre's appeal, commentators have tended to consider the detective hero as a site for readerly sympathy and identification. Barfoot observes that this model was often reframed in feminist scholarship where female investigators were positioned as examples of female agency and of a non-stereotypical femininity. The hard-boiled crime novel in particular became a focal point of the contested politics involved. In feminist scholarship, it was often viewed as a politically reactionary form because of its affirmation of the status quo and its "masculinist" ideologies of law, order, and individualism, all of which seemed to run counter to the oppositional, socially progressive imperatives of feminism. In a short segment on audience, Barfoot calls attention to the generally vague term "reader" often employed in the discourses on

popular fiction and proposes to discuss in greater detail how differences between readers and “target” audiences are discussed in the reception of French and German crime novels written by women.

In contrast to the *roman noir*, the common designation for translations of the American hard-boiled novel as well as for native texts in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, the term *polar*, a popular short form for *roman policier*, enjoyed a lower literary reputation in France because of its association with the classical whodunit. Attempts by female authors to earn high-cultural esteem, for example by being published in Gallimard’s noted “Série Noire,” were largely unsuccessful until the early 1990s. Barfoot identifies variety as a key feature of women’s crime novels in France and points out that the coincidence of female writer and female investigator was quite rare until recently. Rather than facing “the wall of prejudice” (39) erected against a female investigator by the literary-critical establishment, well-known female writers such as Fred Vargas elected to create male protagonists. Before 1996, few French literary critics bothered to discuss female contributions to the genre. Until recently, then, women writers were doubly disadvantaged, by being overlooked in favor of men and in favor of Anglo-American writers. But even now, male critics tend to gainsay that women writers have socio-political intentions and are, if anything, aspiring to psychological explication and domestic intrigue in their crime novels, a valuation that stands in opposition to the gritty realism of the *noir*. Barfoot also notes that the presence of a lesbian heroine is not generally seen as an indicator of a particularly virulent feminism in France.

The West German *Krimi*, in spite of its long history, has never been a source of national pride and has commonly been subsumed under the category of “trivial” mass-market fiction by critics and scholars alike. Around 1970, crime writers succeeded in garnering higher literary recognition as they began to address divisive social issues in what came to be known as the *Soziokrimi*. In spite of these innovations, the *Soziokrimi* tended to retain the structure of the classical whodunit, often featuring an educated, middle-class investigator, very little action, and a reconstitution of order at the end. In addition, any German efforts in the area of crime occurred in a market dominated by imports from England and the United States. In her discussion of the changes of the 1980s, Barfoot glosses over a crucial event, the publication of Jakob Arjouni’s *Happy Birthday, Turk!* (1985), the first German hard-boiled novel which features a rough-edged Turkish-German private investigator delivering justice. Because of the generally subdued history of German-language crime fiction, little information is available about women writers specifically. Based on the creation of two pioneering crime fiction collections devoted entirely to women writers, the situation began to change in the late 1980s. By the mid-1990s, the publishing environment

had changed so drastically that women writers seemed to hold a distinct advantage over their male colleagues in the crime market. Out of the books published as part of this phenomenon, Ingrid Noll's novels and their sympathetic murderers have reached the highest popularity and international exposure. However, some female writers in Germany rejected the oft-voiced ideas that women write differently, that they write primarily for female readers, and that their successes were merely part of a well-timed commercial strategy.

The main sections of the study examine in detail the discourses surrounding two novels from each country, Noëlle Lorient's *L'Inculpé* (1991), Virginie Despentes' *Les chiennes savantes* (1996), Pieke Biermann's *Violetta* (1990), and Maria Gronau's *Weiberwirtschaft* (1996). Barfoot surveys a broad range of commentary, including various mainstream media outlets, alternative publications, published scholarship, doctoral theses, customer reviews on Amazon, fanzines, and online discussion forums. She offers concise and thorough analyses, casting light on lacunae in the commentary, repeatedly emphasized or exaggerated themes, and the language in which they are articulated. She formulates critiques of extant scholarship, although her readings, as well as those she is addressing, rarely seem to move beyond issues of plot and characterization. She explores the manifestations of generic expectations and of gendered readings such as the reluctance among male French critics to associate women writers with the *roman noir* and its political aims. She demonstrates, by the same token, how female critics in France appeared to be uncomfortable with the violent and sexually explicit content of Despentes' novel. *Weiberwirtschaft*, which features a lesbian detective acting as first-person narrator throughout, also drew the ire of commentators, revealing "a strong post-feminist backlash in the German press" (179) and fears of a radical ideology working through the text. In the case of *Violetta*, a persistent view that the *Frauenkrimi* as a genre tends to condone women's crimes against men while condemning men's crimes against women actually worked against Biermann's stated intention of breaking with the chauvinism of the genre and displaying women's capacity for violence.

With this engaging study, Nicola Barfoot has provided a strong basis for further critical attention to European crime fiction and for the numerous conceptual avenues opened up here. Readers will be reminded that crime fiction, often seen as formulaic and created for simple reading pleasure, can become a site of contestation when it intrudes on the terrain of entrenched cultural tenets and challenges the critical establishment. *Frauenkrimi/polar féminin* requires reading knowledge of French and German, as all quotes are rendered in the original only. ✱