

**Crime, Romance and Sex:
Washington Women Journalists in Recent Popular Fiction**

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ABSTRACT

This study of thirteen novels portraying Washington women journalists finds their portrayals have improved since 1990 when one authority concluded that most novels showed women as “unfulfilled unfortunates.” The fictional women in this study, featured most prominently in detective stories, are eager to expose male corruption to further their careers but make little effort to change underlying social causes. These women are searching for relationships, but their careers still take precedence.

Introduction

More than a decade ago, Loren Ghiglione, in one of the most comprehensive studies of the images of American journalists, declared that “only rarely does contemporary fiction portray a woman journalist as a whole human being.”¹ He concluded these exceptions occurred mainly in detective stories. According to Ghiglione, this genre featured women journalists as crime solvers and only to a limited extent showed them as “something other than unfulfilled unfortunates in need of a man.”² Since contemporary fiction primarily is an entertainment vehicle reaching a mass market of millions in both hardcover and paperback sales, it is logical to assume that the public draws its image of women in journalism in part from popular novels. Therefore, the depiction of women journalists seems to be a worthwhile topic for academic research.

Consequently, we decided to see if Ghiglione’s conclusion regarding the sorry depiction of women journalists in fiction still holds true in 2003. Is the woman journalist in popular fiction mainly interested in her relationships with males? Or have the rare exceptions of Ghiglione’s study now become much more the norm? Has the portrayal of fictional women journalists changed as women increasingly have moved up the journalistic ranks with 34 percent of newsroom supervisory positions being held by women at the start of the twenty-first century?³ Their portrayal might be expected to do so, since as feminist critic Joanna Russ has put it, “Authors do not make their plots up out

¹ Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 124.

² *Ibid.*

³ Maurine H. Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons, *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism* 2nd ed. (State College, PA: Strata Publishing Co., 2003), 248.

of thin air.”⁴ Russ took the position that fiction portrays the values of a male-dominated culture, but she also pointed out that “novels, especially, depend upon what central action can be imagined as being performed by the protagonist – i.e., what can a central character do in a book?”⁵ At this point surely women can be “imagined” as doing a variety of activities other than stereotypical man hunting, especially since many novels about journalists are written by journalists themselves. It seems logical to assume that as women actually play a larger role in journalism, fictional portrayals increasingly should show them as strong and independent persons.

To test this hypothesis we decided to look at the fictional portrayal of Washington women journalists since 1990. We limited our study to Washington journalists for two main reasons: (1) Since the early 1990s Washington novels featuring journalists have been listed under Library of Congress subject headings, so it is relatively easy to locate books in this category, and (2) the journalistic corps in the nation’s capital constitutes “an elite group,” according to Rem Rieder, editor of the *American Journalism Review*.⁶ Consequently, it appears that if the portrayal of any group of women journalists has changed from stereotypical to realistic depictions, this most likely would be the one. We also thought it would be useful to see to what degree the impact of changing communications technologies have had on fictional women journalists. In addition, we wanted to examine the intersections of race, class and gender in their portrayals.

⁴ Joanna Russ, “What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can’t Write,” in *To Write Like a Woman* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶ Personal interview by a co-author with Rem Rieder, College Park, MD., Jan. 10, 2003.

Books Used

We found the following fourteen novels published from 1990 to date by a catalogue search using a subject heading of Washington women journalists (books are listed in order of publication date):

Special Interests, Linda Cashdan (1990); *Happy Endings*, Sally Quinn (1991); *Knight and Day*, Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman (1995); *Press Corpse*, Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman (1996); *Death of a Garden Pest*, Ann Ripley (1996); *Hidden Agenda*, Thom Racina (1997); *The Murder Lover*, Ellen Rawlings (1997), *Deadly Harvest*, Ellen Rawlings (1997), *Death with Honors*, Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman (1998); *The Ultimatum*, T. Davis Bunn (1999); *The Golden Age*, Gore Vidal (2000); *The Sky is Falling*, Sidney Sheldon (2000); *Journey*, Danielle Steel (2000); *Special Interest*, Chris Benson (2001).⁷ Thirteen were used for our study (the Vidal novel was excluded because the woman journalist, a publisher, depicted in it was not presently engaged in journalism.)⁸ All of the fourteen books were aimed at general readers and published in hardback except for the two by Rawlings, which appeared only in paperback. Most of the others also were issued in paperback.

⁷ See Linda Cashdan, *Special Interests* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); Sally Quinn, *Happy Endings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman, *Knight & Day* (New York: Forge, 1995); Ann Ripley, *Death of a Garden Pest* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman, *Press Corpse* (New York: Forge, 1996); Thom Racina, *Hidden Agenda* (New York: Dutton, 1999); Ellen Rawlings, *The Murder Lover* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997); Ellen Rawlings, *Deadly Harvest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997); Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman, *Death With Honors* (New York: Forge, 1998); T. Davis Bunn, *The Ultimatum* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999, reprinted as part of *The Reluctant Prophet*, 2001); Gore Vidal, *The Golden Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Sidney Sheldon, *The Sky Is Falling* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Danielle Steel, *Journey* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2000); Chris Benson, *Special Interest* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2001).

⁸ Vidal's *The Golden Age* received more serious attention from reviewers than the other works. It is the last in Vidal's American Chronicle series. The newspaper publishing career of the character Caroline de Traxler Sanford figures prominently in earlier novels in the series (which were beyond the scope of this study), but is barely mentioned in this work.

Nine of the books, those by Ripley, Nesson and Neuman, Racina, Rawlings, Sheldon and Benson, fall into the mystery genre and were written by authors with backgrounds in either journalism or television. This is in line with the general popularity of mysteries among the reading public, since mystery fiction “garners, according to recent statistics, 21 or 22 per cent of all sales in the United States.”⁹ In the cases of Ripley, Nesson and Neuman, and Rawlings, the mysteries were parts of series. (This is in keeping with the detective genre in which series are far more common than single works.) Ripley’s book moves her detective character, Louise Eldridge, a master gardener, into a Washington setting for the first time. The three books by Nessen, a former White House television correspondent and press secretary to former President Gerald Ford, and Neuman, former White House correspondent for *USA TODAY*, are subtitled *Knight & Day* mysteries. They present an intrepid couple, Jerry Knight, a radio talk show host, and Jane Day, a *Washington Post* reporter, teaming up to solve crimes. Rawlings’ books feature the same main character, Rachel Crowne, a free-lance journalist whose curiosity leads her to trap murderers.

The other books on Washington women journalists represent varied genres. Bunn’s book, characterized as Christian fiction, pictures faithful, god-fearing churchgoers converting an unemployed woman television broadcaster and triumphing over evil secular forces.¹⁰ The book by Cashdan, a journalist, is billed as a Washington novel of sex, power and love centered on a radio reporter. It is somewhat akin to Quinn’s *Happy Endings*, a romantic suspense novel that is a sequel to her previous book, *Regrets Only*.

⁹ Kathleen Gregory Klein, ed. *Women Times Three* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1995):3.

Her work reflects her familiarity with *The Washington Post* where she wrote feature stories before marrying the executive editor, Ben Bradlee. The remaining book, *Journey*, categorized as psychological fiction, is the fiftieth written by popular romance novelist Danielle Steel.

Four of the authors are men: Racina, Sheldon, Benson, Bunn. Four are women: Cashdan, Ripley, Quinn, Steel. Three novels are coauthored by a male, Nessen, and a female, Neumann. One author, Benson, is an African American. With this split in the gender of the authors in mind, we wanted to determine whether the women protagonists in the books by women authors acted differently (were more empowered and independent) than the protagonists in the books written by men or in the coauthored novels.

Literature Review

Women journalists rarely appeared in American novels during the greater part of the nineteenth century. In fact journalist Sara Payson Parton, who wrote under the name Fanny Fern, wrote one of the earliest novels featuring a female journalist; *Ruth Hall, A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*, was written in 1855.¹¹ By the 1890s newswomen became more popular as protagonists. In the twentieth century they were often the subjects of newspaper novels, films and comic strips. According to Ghiglione, these women have been

expected to hunger for a good man or a family as much as for a good story. If they don't, they are dismissed as unfulfilled—women who might

¹⁰ *The Ultimatum* was published in T. Davis Bunn, *The Reluctant Prophet: Two Bestsellers in One Volume: The Warning and The Ultimatum* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publisher, 2001). *The Warning* has no references to women journalists.

¹¹ Ghiglione, *The American Journalist, Paradox of the Press*, 122-123.

as well be men. If they do pursue men, they are rejected as women, not serious about their career—dependent women who rely on men for self-fulfillment. Fiction, for the most part, still suggests the best place for a woman is not in the newsroom.¹²

The scholar who perhaps has best studied the representations of journalists in the mass media is Howard Good. He has written on the image of the journalist in film, fiction and autobiography.¹³ Of particular interest to this study is Good's work on fiction and gender. In his book *Acquainted with the Night*, Good argued that fiction can be a valuable source for historians, offering "a symbolic and subjective account of journalism" that "constitutes a kind of diary of the attitudes and tensions and dreams of the society that produced and consumed it."¹⁴ Newspaper fiction is sometimes autobiographical and often reflects an anxiety about the status of journalism, Good wrote. In all, journalists are endowed with unusual investigative powers to seek out wrong doers, giving fiction the power to explain "away the social chaos of our times as the work of a handful of conspirators, and so absolv[ing] the rest of us."¹⁵

Good explicitly examined gender in *Girl Reporter, Gender, Journalism and the Movies*. This work primarily examines the Torchy Blane movie series produced between 1937 and 1939, and thus is outside the scope of this paper. However, in explaining the occurrence of the girl reporter in the 1920s and 30s, Good wrote that in the genre of newspaper films, "journalism functions as a vehicle for exploring certain gender-based

¹² Ibid., 127.

¹³ Howard Good, *Acquainted with the Night: The Image of Journalists in American Fiction, 1890-1930* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1986), Howard Good, *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1989), Howard Good, *The Journalist as Autobiographer* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1993), Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), Howard Good, "The Image of War Correspondents in Anglo-American Fiction," in *Journalism Monographs*, ed. Joseph P. McKerns (July, 1986).

¹⁴ Good, *Acquainted with the Night*, 96.

¹⁵ Ibid., 103.

conflicts—career versus marriage, workplace versus home, co-workers versus family, freedom of the night versus middle-class domesticity.”¹⁶

We located one study that specifically examined the representations of women journalists in fiction. This unpublished 1981 study by Donna Born, titled “The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction 1890 to Present,” examined representations of women journalists in novels and short stories from 1890 to 1980. Born found that female heroines tended to be portrayed as “competent, independent, courageous, and compassionate professional,”¹⁷ though they often experienced conflict between their personal and professional lives. In most cases the heroine appeared to be “better than female—or more like the male—thus explaining her professional ability as well as her loss of personal happiness.”¹⁸

Born argued that literary themes reflect the feminism of the era in which they were written. Fictional heroines during World War II, for example, depended on men for security and protection, while at the same time the women were committed to their profession. After the war, she found women journalists were judged by success in personal relationships rather than in professional terms, although there was more recognition in fiction of professional accomplishments. Born’s study contained few references to Washington women journalists in general. It ended, however, with references to Allan Drury’s *Anna Hastings*, a novel that showed an unscrupulous woman

¹⁶ Good, *Girl Reporter*, 30.

¹⁷ Donna Born. “The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction 1890 to the Present.” Association for Education in Journalism. Michigan State University, East Lansing, August 1981, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

who lost her family as she clawed her way to the top of a media empire in a relentless quest for power and prestige.¹⁹

A more recent study titled “Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative” makes note of the increasing prevalence of women journalists (and other female media workers, such as television producers and public relations professionals) in modern works of fiction. In the genre she calls “the single woman narrative,” Deborah Philips argues that heroines of these novels are university educated, and that these jobs in the “glamorous end of the middle-class professions” give women the disposable income needed to build a life of consumption.²⁰ (Philips notes that single woman novels themselves confuse the lines between fiction and journalism—books such as *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones’ Diary* began as newspaper columns.)²¹ Concerned with designer furniture and clothes, these women’s lives are shaped by the “style journalism” in magazines such as *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue* and *GQ*.²² These women, armed with an expectation of labels and luxury, confuse their desire for a man with the commodities he is expected to provide. Women in these novels benefit from the independence and work opportunities won by second-wave feminism, but do not challenge gender and patriarchal norms.²³ Their desire is to find male providers who can buy more for them than they can by themselves.

To a degree we found evidence of this approach to consumption in the books on Washington women journalists. Most of the books studied except Bunn’s work referred

¹⁹ See Allen Drury, *Anna Hastings: The Story of a Washington Newspaperperson* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1977).

²⁰ Deborah Philips, “Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 11, no. 3 (2000): 239.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

²² *Ibid.*, 240, 242.

²³ *Ibid.*, 240, 248-51.

to a greater or lesser extent to the kinds of clothing worn by the protagonists and the style of decorating in their homes. More significant, however, was the fact that many of the books are part of the mystery/detective genre. Feminism and female heroines have come slowly to this genre, writes Birgitta Berglund.²⁴ She argued that until recently the majority of detective protagonists were men since the notion of a woman taking charge went against traditional expectations. Independent and assertive women were often cast as villains, not heroines. During the first half of the 20th century, if a writer created a female heroine, it was common for her to be the detective's romantic interest. Sometimes a heroine of a detective novel was cast as a spinster, "so completely harmless and endearing, and so essentially feminine in her ways and manners, that she can get away with murder—or at least the detection of murder—without threatening male authority."²⁵

In the past few years Berglund argued women detectives have been independent professionals committed to their careers as academics, teachers or journalists. In view of successful writing in this genre, Berglund has forecast an increasingly positive role for women: "The tough private eye will become more vulnerable, perhaps even be allowed to have a family, while the gentle spinster will turn out to have been a feminist all the time; and we will see more 'ordinary' women who juggle families and careers while staying in charge of the case."²⁶

Kathleen Klein, the foremost feminist critic of mysteries, however, has viewed the future less sanguinely: "The feminist detective winds up supporting the existing system which oppresses women when she reestablishes the ordered status quo.... Adopting the

²⁴ Birgitta Berglund, "Desires and Devices: On Women Detectives in Fiction," in *The Art of Detective Fiction*, ed. Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales, and Robert Vilain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 138-51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

formula traps their authors.”²⁷ In another work she noted that since detectives by definition enter the male world, the phrase “woman detective” is “an oxymoron – if female, then not detective; if detective, then not really female. Or perhaps I should say she either is or is not Woman.”²⁸

This paper seeks to draw on the concepts articulated by these authors to examine the fictional depiction of Washington women journalists in an effort to see whether the portrayal of women in recent years has shifted to give women more recognition as autonomous individuals. It recognizes, however, that such a study is inherently limited because fiction is not necessarily a valid reproduction of reality. As Michele Barrett has pointed out, “We may learn much, from an analysis of novels, about the ways in which meaning was constructed in a particular historical period, but our knowledge will not add up to a general knowledge of that social formation.”²⁹ Barrett cautions us to beware of the processes that reproduce gender ideology in various periods, such as stereotyping – imagery that represents the “wish-fulfillment of patriarchy” and compensation – “the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the ‘moral value’ of femininity.”³⁰

Washington women journalists as mystery detectives

The nine novels in which Washington women journalists play the role of detectives emphasize the relationship of their profession to their investigative activities. Although the women are engaged in various types of journalism—two are newspaper

²⁶ Ibid., 150.

²⁷ Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995),

²⁸ Kathleen Gregory Klein, “Habeas Corpus: Feminism and Detective Fiction,” in *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction*, ed. Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 173- 74.

²⁹ Michele Barrett, “Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender,” in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1986), 73-74.

reporters, one is a radio journalist and free-lance magazine writer, three are television journalists and one is a free-lance writer for a local newsmagazine—journalism as a profession legitimizes their role as detectives in two important ways. First, it frees them from traditional expectations regarding female behavior because journalists have assumed a social responsibility to get to the bottom of stories even if they have to break through social conventions. Second, their roles as journalists allow the women to push their way into circles of power, circles that are often corrupt and ripe for investigation.

The best example of the Washington woman journalist in this genre is the *Knight & Day* series by Nessen and Neuman.³¹ Consequently, it will be examined at length. In this series, Washington is a place that “turns good people bad,”³² and an “equal-opportunity sleaze bucket. Not all officials were for sale. But most of them were for rent.”³³ More importantly, however, Washington is a city filled with conflicts: “Black and white. Rich and poor. North and South. Hell, Washington, D.C., was the capital of those divisions.”³⁴ It is also a place where the press is accorded a significant amount of power, where if “you want something done, you’ve got to attract the attention of the media first.”³⁵ Washington details, such as street names, are very accurate and Washington celebrities are only thinly disguised. In a passage describing the White House Correspondents dinner, an annual D.C. ritual, Nessen and Neuman thinly veil the notable Helen Thomas as “Heddy Kirkland, the ancient wire service correspondent” who

³⁰ Ibid., 80-81.

³¹ The authors drew on vast Washington experience in newspapers, broadcasting and political communication in writing their mysteries.

³² Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 256.

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 39.

³⁵ Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 98.

had “blazed a trail for her and other women reporters” by breaking into the all male National Press Club and Gridiron Club.³⁶

In this setting, Jane Day is a career-oriented and ambitious reporter for *The Washington Post*. After growing up hearing her mother tell her not to “let a man get in the way of your career,”³⁷ she appears in the novels as a 30-ish reporter who is feeling conflicted over her profession and her desire for domesticity and a home. Jane had “prided herself on being an aggressive reporter,” but “wondered whether she possessed a sufficient amount of the killer instinct to succeed as a reporter.”³⁸

In each of the three novels, Jane teams up with conservative broadcast personality Jerry Knight and D.C. homicide cop A.L. Jones to solve a prominent murder grabbing headlines in the city. Though Jane’s relationship with Jerry is prickly in the beginning, by the end of the series they are committed to a relationship. Among the reasons she is attracted to him is the fact that Jerry not threatened by her career.³⁹ But it is Jane’s career, in fact, that ultimately keeps them apart. In the final book, Jane is “bored with daily journalism.”⁴⁰ Excited about the possibility of reaching a broader audience with her ideas, she takes a job offer as a scriptwriter in Hollywood (though she almost says no because of her relationship with Jerry). Jerry, who does not plan to move to Los Angeles with Jane, doesn’t blame her for leaving him since she has the same kind of ambition he does.⁴¹ The two plan to continue the relationship, visiting each other whenever possible.

³⁶ Nessen and Neuman, *Press Corpse*, 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁰ Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 282, 283.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 284.

Jane's job at the *Post* is not easy. She works in a world of men. Her editor, the executive editor and the newspaper's lawyer are all men. Her editor fits the traditional stereotype of a drunken, cursing city editor constantly making passes at his female employees. When he isn't accidentally brushing against her breasts⁴² or proposing to come to her apartment for a nightcap,⁴³ he insults her:

Naturally, Scoffield zeroed in on the one weak spot in Jane's story. "I thought I told you to include police reaction!" he exploded as soon as she hit the office Monday morning. "I called but they never called back," Jane stammered. "Then you goddamn write that you couldn't reach the police, not that they had no comment. Jesus Christ, you're worse than a goddamn TV reporter."⁴⁴

The world outside the newsroom isn't much better. Jane knows that "sometimes women reporters had to use their wiles, because male sources didn't take them seriously. To flirt, perchance to scoop."⁴⁵

Despite her strong opinions and tolerance for the news business, Jane is portrayed as a bundle of self-doubt. She worries over her body, "scrawny everywhere except her thighs," her needle nose, and her curly orange hair.⁴⁶ Jane also represents one ideal of what career women should strive to be in order to be attractive to men. In these books it is not classic beauty, nor clothes or other commodities: it is self-examination and even self-doubt. Jane worries constantly that the flaws in her relationship with Jerry are her fault,⁴⁷ but it is this self-examination that sets Jane apart from other women. In Jerry's eyes, these imperfections are appealing. Though when he'd first met her, he felt that

⁴² Nessen and Neuman, *Press Corpse*, 33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁴ Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 106.

⁴⁵ Nessen and Neuman, *Press Corpse*, 16.

⁴⁶ Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 15, 16.

⁴⁷ Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 15.

Jane's face had an "irritating intensity he saw in most women reporters,"⁴⁸ Jane's constant self-doubt triggers a Jerry's protective instinct. He feels Jane is "not like most of the hard-charging, ball-breaking career women he encountered in Washington. Jerry's reaction to her insecurity was to want to protect her from the cruelties and uncertainties of life."⁴⁹

Chris Benson's heroine protagonist, Angela McKenzie, is in some ways an African American version of Jane Day, although she is far less self-conscious about her looks and her relationships with men. She has a long-time lover whom she ditches with few regrets during the course of the novel, but another, more appealing suitor soon appears on the scene. Along with a police detective, he saves her at the end from the hands of the murderer, a political consultant who has killed her best friend to keep her from exposing the consultant's corrupt relationships with the tobacco industry.

Benson, vice president of Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago, is the former Washington editor for *Ebony* magazine. He presents Angela as a middle-class woman determined to "prove something to her editors, show the White boys they didn't have a monopoly on intelligence and talent...make her mark as a star writer and to do it all before she turned 35."⁵⁰ She manages to do it by dint of being smart and extremely hard working, piecing together evidence that highlights the seamy side of Washington's power structure, in which African Americans operate at a disadvantage. Her only friend at the newspaper is another African American reporter who is out of favor with his bosses.

Unlike the protagonists in the other books, the heroine of *Death of a Garden Pest* is not a professional journalist but a suburban housewife interested in gardening who

⁴⁸ Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 77.

⁴⁹ Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 95.

gained fame by solving a crime in an earlier book. In this book she is asked to host a gardening show on public television that becomes the target of anti- environmentalists. Considered an amateur by her colleagues, she becomes a suspect herself when the woman she replaced on the show is murdered. For our study the book is mainly of interest because it shows the staff tensions within news organizations and jealousy among women journalists.

Hidden Agenda straddles the line between being an adventure story and a mystery. It features a naïve heroine who becomes a cable news star due to the machinations of an evil group of politicians from the Christian right who plan to run her for President. Happily married with two children, Jonelle Patterson is shocked when murders occur at news events she is covering. It is her husband who points out that these grotesque events appear to have been planned to boost her career as a television star. This unlikely story dramatizes the fact that corporate interests can manipulate women journalists. Yet, it also shows that they can outwit their foes by detecting wrongdoers and publicizing them as Jonelle eventually did.

Unlike the other books, Rawlings's mysteries do not deal with skullduggery in the nation's capital. They feature Rachel Crowne, a twice-divorced free-lance journalist, who solves murders of ordinary citizens in a suburban setting. In *The Murder Lover*, she draws strength from a visit to the Holocaust Museum in downtown Washington. Determined not to be a victim herself, she fights off a murderer who attacks young Jewish women. In *Deadly Harvest* she discovers the murderer is a most unlikely individual – an elderly woman in a wheelchair. Of all the protagonists studied, Rachel seems to be the least dependent on males, although she has sexual relationships. More

⁵⁰Benson, *Special Interest*, 6.

interested in children than in husbands, she parts company with a man who objects to her friendship with a deprived African American child from Baltimore.

Relationship Stories

If relationships play a significant part in the murder investigations of mystery novels, the reverse also may be true. In some novels involving Washington women journalists, investigations play an important part in novels principally concerned with relationships. *The Sky Is Falling* by Sidney Sheldon, a best-selling author and script-writer, subtly explores gender conflicts through the pretext of investigation in an action-packed thriller.

The protagonist, Dana Evans, a former war correspondent working for a local Washington television station, begins investigating a rash of accidents that has killed off the prominent Winthrop family. Her relationships, however, form a major theme of the book. Early on, her fiancé Jeff, also a television anchor, proposes, to the delight of her adopted son Kemal, a war orphan from Sarajevo who has lost an arm. “The three of them were going to live together, vacation together, and just be together. That magic word.”⁵¹

The prospect of this relationship is endangered first by Dana’s investigation—Kemal is doped by a “nanny” to keep Dana from solving the Winthrop murders—and second by another woman. Jeff’s ex-wife Rachel, diagnosed with cancer, hopes to lure him back, thus depriving Dana of Jeff’s support during the investigation. Rachel’s character evolves from vamp to martyred saint, however, when she finds out the cancer is fatal and conceals it from Jeff to send him back to Dana.

⁵¹ Sheldon, *The Sky Is Falling*, 69.

In fact, other than Dana, all the other Washington women turn out to be villains. The nanny, Mrs. Delaney, drugs Kemal and plans to kidnap him,⁵² a senator's wife aids in planning the kidnapping,⁵³ and a female co-worker helps execute those plans.⁵⁴ Dana is dependent on Jeff and her bosses to save her life. The story ends with her marriage to Jeff and the formal adoption of Kemal.

Linda Cashdan's *Special Interests* also features a Washington woman journalist investigating a major story—in this case it is the illegal use of undocumented workers to work in a makeshift factory handling hazardous chemicals. The main character, Cynthia Matthews, is a radio reporter who made a name for herself doing freelance exposés, most notably one about an ex-boyfriend. In this novel not only is Cynthia's career more important than her love life, but journalism itself is seen to exert ultimate influence in Washington, as evident in this toast to Cynthia: "To the woman who managed to have the city's biggest catch fall in love with her, but, in the end, decided journalistic integrity was more important than bagging the big one! To ultimate power!"⁵⁵

Cynthia sees herself as two separate people: "Reporter Matthews" versus "Lover Matthews," "experienced fact finder" versus "pathetic pushover."⁵⁶ Fortunately, Cynthia doesn't quite measure up to the another type of career woman who appears in the book. This is the Capitol Hill secretary who "probably had never married because she was married to her job, married to the man she served, much the way nuns are married to

⁵² Ibid., 291, 292.

⁵³ Ibid., 303, 304.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 301.

⁵⁵ Cashdan, *Special Interests*, 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24, 25.

God, and she served him with a similar sense of mission and fulfillment. Capitol Hill was filled with such women.”⁵⁷

Much of the book revolves around finding out who the real Cynthia Matthews is—is she a tough enough journalist to run a story gained from a drunken senator grieving for his dead wife? Or a compassionate farm girl who will have the sympathy not to run it?⁵⁸ She only achieves balance in her life, and her writing, after she enters a relationship with lawyer Jed Farber. Toward the end of the book he pronounces her earlier writing to have been “a very sharp bit of reporting” and “shrewd, clever, exacting—but icy cold,” in contrast to her current writing that has evolved into being “warm. Loving, even, in a way.”⁵⁹ The book ends with his marriage proposal and Cynthia asking for an “old-fashioned commitment, not a new-fashioned one.”⁶⁰

In Danielle Steel’s *Journey*, journalism takes a back seat to relationships. The main character, Madeline, is the star anchor of the network her husband, Jack Hunter, owns. But neither seems to be consumed by journalism like the characters in the other books. Madeline is caught by surprise when the U.S. invades Iraq. When the story first breaks—on a Friday night—instead of rushing to the newsroom, she thinks “it was going to be an important story for her too, on Monday.”⁶¹ In fact, the pair takes a two-week vacation to Europe just after the attack.⁶²

This novel is principally concerned with Washington, DC as a backdrop for the psychological and physical abuse Madeline receives from her husband. As part of her

⁵⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 288.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 371.

⁶¹ Steel, *Journey*, 61.

⁶² Ibid., 92.

growing awareness of the extent of her abuse, Madeline begins to form close relationships with other females: the First Lady, a therapist, her long-lost daughter and finally a women's support group that wants to help her save herself.⁶³ The opportunity to serve on the First Lady's commission on violence against women serves to educate Madeline about abuse and introduces her to a man who eventually helps her to escape her marriage. Her husband's status as an advisor to the President on media issues surrounding an attack on Iraq serves as an exercise of his male power and influence.

Madeline's position as a journalist occupies a pivotal, although limited, role in the novel. First, it is evidence of Jack's influence in transforming Madeline's fate from a young victim of spousal abuse in her first marriage to a beautiful, successful anchorwoman. Second, it serves a dual purpose in that it both hinders and helps her. It keeps her married to Jack for a lengthy period (he threatens to ruin her career if she leaves). Yet, it also gives her a lifeline out of the relationship (though she doesn't believe it, others continually remind her that she will have her pick of jobs once she leaves Jack and his network).

An even more interesting transformation of a Washington woman journalist occurs in the book *Happy Endings* by Sally Quinn. This is the only book in our study that depicts a woman journalist's pregnancy. The main character, Allison Sterling, undergoes a personal transformation from career woman to human being and then to tragic heroine in the course of a pregnancy that ends with the death of her disabled baby. In the process both she and her husband, a distinguished journalist who has fathered a child by the First Lady, are unfaithful to each other as they move in Washington's highest social circles.

⁶³ Ibid., 253.

Early in the book, Allison is seen as a sex object. After she eagerly accepts an offer to be the first woman editor at the *Washington Daily*, she is told by the man who hired her “God, you’re an easy lay.”⁶⁴ When she takes the position, she desires to be seen as sexless. After hearing male editors telling an offensive joke, Allison tells her boss: “I want to be neuter ... you watch. I am going to be so sexless in this job that after a while nobody will think of me as a woman.”⁶⁵ Yet, it is her pregnancy that makes her human in male eyes. Male reporters confide in her about their children and home life, seeing her as “a woman, instead of the hard-nosed ambitious automation.”⁶⁶ Her pregnancy also provides her an entry into a seemingly secret female society when she is invited to a monthly mother’s lunch at the paper.⁶⁷ In the later months of her pregnancy, however, she describes herself as becoming a sexless outcast:

The bigger you got, the more invisible you got. Men in Washington, and particularly men in power, discounted a woman the minute she started to show. It was as if they expected your brain to shrink as your stomach swelled.... They would look at her face, smile in initial recognition, their eyes would instinctively travel downward, and immediately glaze over.⁶⁸

Finally, with the death of her baby, Allison turns into a tragic heroine, “still beautiful” but “terribly pale and gaunt.”⁶⁹ She is greeted with the promise of redemption at the end of the book when she reconciles with husband and suspects she may again be pregnant. Through all her travail, however, including an affair with a reporter who works under her, she continues to perform successfully as the top woman on her newspaper.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 271.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 329, 330.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 502.

The Ultimatum by T. Davis Bunn presents the commercial news media as crass, self-absorbed and ego-driven during a depression that wipes out the U.S. economy. When the striking mixed-race protagonist, Linda Kee, a former CBS television star, becomes a spokesperson for a Christian crusade to reform the nation's political structure, network bosses attempt to hire her back to silence her. After that fails, they try to smear her by quoting ex-boyfriends who called her "ambitious and grasping and calculating and manipulative."⁷⁰ At first fearful that this will disrupt her growing relationship with a widowed minister, Linda is reassured that the Christian faith embraces all those who sincerely repent.

Conclusion

After studying these novels, it's difficult not to assume that women have made progress in Washington journalism in the late twentieth century, at least as far as writers of fiction offer a realistic portrayal of their situation. In all of the novels reviewed, the protagonists are planning to keep on with their careers, regardless of whether they have found a satisfying relationship with a man. The women who are eager to have children are finding ways to do so, adopting like Dana in *The Sky Is Falling*, serving as a mentor like Rachel in *Deadly Harvest*, getting pregnant like Allison in *Happy Endings* or becoming a stepmother by marrying a divorced man with children like Cynthia in *Special Interests*. None of the heroines appear to be desperately seeking a man to fulfill their lives. In fact, Cynthia is described by her fiancé as a better journalist because of their newfound love.

⁷⁰ Bunn, *The Ultimatum*, 255.

Yet, most of the women, with the possible exception of Rachel, find it difficult to balance conflicting demands in their lives. Their investigative prowess as journalists, as well as detectives, can be demonstrated only by temporarily relinquishing women's traditional roles while they pursue stories and track down wrong-doers. This brings them considerable anxiety and may lead them into actual danger. For example, in *The Sky Is Falling*, Dana's need to find a caretaker for her adopted son, Kemal, makes her an easier target than she would have been otherwise for a sinister gang of murderers.

In many ways the novels depict women having a more difficult time proving themselves than men in the male-dominated field of journalism. Jane in *Knight and Day*, for example, flubs her first story and is distrusted by her editors. Angela in *Special Interest* is nearly fired by her white editors and treated with more suspicion than white male reporters. Cynthia in *Special Interests* is lectured for a radio spot news item that her unscrupulous boss does not like.

In addition, especially in the case of broadcasters who are uniformly described as extremely attractive, the women seem to get ahead on the basis of looks as well as ability. Jonelle in *Hidden Agenda* has no clue that she has moved up rapidly in broadcasting because she is a good "front" for a dangerous ultra-right group. Madeleine in *Journey* is a Cinderella-like creation of her domineering husband who displays her on his network. One is left with the conclusion that changing media technology, with broadcasting supplanting print as the most common medium of information, has exploited women for their sex appeal rather than served to reward them for intelligence.

Even Allison, the woman editor at a thinly disguised version of *The Washington Post* in *Happy Endings*, appears to have benefited from her sex appeal in gaining the

attention of her editors. The least successful woman professionally, Rachel, also is described as the least good looking. It is worthy of note that Jane Day, the *Washington Post* reporter who worries about her appearance and weight, ends up leaving the newspaper to pursue a career as a screenwriter.

In terms of the sex of the author, we found that the most multi-dimensional portrait of a woman journalist, Jane Day, was created by the male and female writing team of Nessen and Neuman, who were married at the time they wrote their novels. Also, multi-faceted characters were created by African-American author Benson and two female writers, Ripley and Rawlings. Yet, the most stereotypical character in terms of a woman being seen as a helpless victim was Madeline, created by female author Danielle Steel. Thus, we could make no generalization about the sex of the author influencing a realistic portrayal of women.

The Washington locale highlights the relationship of women to the political system while portraying them as outsiders, just as women seem to be outsiders in their own news organizations. The political climate of Washington gives women journalists plenty to investigate, while highlighting the differences in lifestyle between powerful politicians and their influential backers and the unfortunate homeless frequently seen on streets near the capitol.

Interestingly, at least three of the protagonists—Jane Day, Cynthia Matthews and Angela McKenzie—live in Adams Morgan, a mixed racial and economic area now being gentrified. They symbolize reporters who straddle the two worlds of the powered and the unempowered residents of Washington. In general, the women pictured in the novels are middle class and upwardly mobile in their profession, their living standards and their love

lives. The main exception is Allison Sterling of *Happy Endings*, who represents old money and highly placed contacts.

The representations of these women are not wholly flattering. Sometimes they are depicted without compassion toward their sources, coworkers and the general public in their eagerness to advance themselves. It is true, as Steve Hallock noted in a *Quill* article, that the characters in journalistic novels “are a sex-hungry, scandal loving lot, and many of the situations are too fantastic to be believable.”⁷¹ Still, it is possible that the portrayals of these women contain truths about the present situation of women in journalism that are not altogether comforting. The women want to succeed in a male-oriented workplace dominated by the male world of Washington politics. They are eager to expose corruption to advance their careers, but with the exception of Linda Kee in *The Ultimatum*, are not seeking ways to change the system of corruption. While these novels show that Washington journalism isn’t necessarily a hospitable field for women, they also demonstrate that it provides opportunities for women to match wits with males and to succeed.

This limited study points to the value of examining the depiction of women journalists in popular culture as a way of describing their status and assessing the meanings of their roles in society. It is in line with recent scholarly interest in the fictional depictions of journalists.⁷² Whether or not they are reflective of real life, these fictional images are worthy of study because they show how authors are presenting

⁷¹ Steve Hallock. “Fiction or Truth.” *Quill*. May, 1997, p. 34.

⁷² A notable example of this interest is the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project of the Norman Lear Center of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication. This project not only includes a periodic journal and online essays and resources, but an extensive database cataloguing over 22,500 cultural artifacts (such as radio programs, comic books, cartoons, short stories and novels) that feature journalists.

women's roles in Washington journalism to a mass market audience that is likely to be chiefly women. We can assume that that these fictional portrayals therefore may be a factor in shaping public perceptions of the role of Washington women journalists in society, particularly among other women.

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