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Women, Detection and Forensic Crime Fiction

Dr. Maysaa H. Jaber
Psychological Research Center, Iraq
maysaa.h.jaber@prc.edu.iq
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4840-6598

ABSTRACT

This article examines forensic crime fiction in relation to the representation of women and the process of detection. It investigates how women in forensic crime fiction negotiate female roles in the context of policing and the legal institutions in which they are placed and interrogate critical issues such as power dynamics, social critique, female agency and violence in what a traditionally known as a male-dominated genre. Analyzing the perceptions and expectations surrounding the portrayal of women and their agency modes, it will be argued here that forensic crime fiction operates as an alternative to the masculine hardboiled crime narrative as it reveals the transgressive potential of the female forensic pathologist as a detective. By studying Patritia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, the chief medical examiner in the Scarpetta series, it will be shown that the female forensic pathologist, representing a formal authority and carrying power over the bodies she examines, professionalizes the female role of the detective and proves to be transgressive in the way she subverts the legal system via a complicated relationship with the police and the male policemen/detectives she works with. It will also be shown that Patritia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta embodies the transformations in the genre through narratives that reveal a new perspective to envisioning the female protagonist as a detective, the shift in detection and its procedures as well as the positionality of the female forensic scientist against legal and police institutions.

Keywords: forensic crime fiction; feminist crime fiction; the female body; detection; Patritia Cornwell; Kay Scarpetta.

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Introduction

Since its birth, crime fiction has been a male-dominated genre with a male detective tasked with investigating and solving crimes. From archetypal images of British detectives such as Sherlock Holmes to American "tough-guys" such as Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade and Mike Hammer, the genre relies on tropes and images of male loner private-eyes who are set against criminals, gangsters and mobsters. The dominance of the male detective not only as a crime solver but as an obliquitous presence who represents the rule of law and order especially in American hardboiled crime fiction, cannot be understated. However, the shift to women's detective fiction— crime novels written by female authors, saw many developments not only in the introduction of the female detective but also the presentation of themes and plots that center on female characters.

In women's detective fiction, feminism is brought about in the examination of the primary role of the female detective, and it is also articulated in "her necessary predicate, the female self-acknowledged feminist writer" (Palmer, 2001, p.56). Feminist authors such as Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton have reimagined and rewritten the hardboiled crime novel. The "diversity" of female heroines of crime narratives "reflect[s] recent social changes, with perhaps the most important influence of the genre being feminism" (Reddy, 1988, p.2). By featuring strong-willed female detectives such as V.I. Warshawski and Kinsey Millhone and challenging the rigid (sexist) frameworks of the genre, female authors have subverted gender norms and propelled detective writing to a new era. However, as Stephen Knight comments, there is an "inherent difficulty for writers speaking as women, usually as feminists, in a form which is deeply implicated with masculinism" (2004, p. 162-3). Horsely and Horsely also speak of the tension between the "feminist perspective" and the 'hard masculine edge of old-fashioned policing" which, according to this view, produces a female detective "acting in subservience" to the patriarchal frameworks of the criminal justice system (2006, p.10).

The "intrinsically empiricist bent", as Joy Palmler puts it, added to the making of the traditional detective novel and its structures. With the pursuit of "positivist knowledge", the detective novel leans on masculine frameworks involving the male detective's drive to "know" and use logic and rationale in the detection and deduction processes (2001, p. 56). These very frameworks pose a challenge to the feminist readings of the genre in general. By positioning the masculinist urge of the detective and his prerogative to pursue evidence and solve the puzzle/mystery against a victim who is "despite biology, always female" (Klein, 1995, p.173), the detective novel operates on the basis of a male gaze centered on the (female) body. In this regard, Kathleen Klein explains

> The script labeled "detective" in readers' minds did not naturally overlap or even mesh with that labeled "woman." Attempts to raise the detective script to a paramount position by abjuring the conventional image of women and creating a woman detective who followed the male pattern failed as the inevitably conflicting script for women intervened; the unity of the novel's

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formula was then destroyed. Similarly, attempts to raise the "woman" script undercut the necessary elements of the detective formula. To succeed commercially, authors decided that their character was either not a proper detective or not a proper woman. Occasionally, they drew both conclusion. (Klein, 1995, p. 4)

Considering the complexities that Klein explains, feminist scholars critique the patriarchal construction of the genre. The inclination to contain women and reinstate the status quo is thus central to the feminist criticism of traditional detective narratives. As such, the creation of the female detective in itself becomes a contradiction, an oxymoron that articulates the limitations and constraints of the genre as far as women are concerned. On the other hand, feminist readings of the female detective explore the conflict between gender and genre which favors the “formula of the genre” over “feminist ideology” and this is due to how this formula is based on a “world whose 'sex/gender valuations reinforce male hegemony” (Klein, 1995, p.225).

It is noteworthy to mention that the representation of women in detective fiction has shifted from the Victorian era where women served as immature detectives with characters such as Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple, to the 1960s and 1970s that witnessed the inauguration of feminist detectives like P.D. James’s Cordelia Gray and Marcia Muller’s Sharon McCone to the more recent development of professional female forensic scientists who hold an authority over crime scenes and the investigations. Indeed, the launch of feminist detective fiction in the 1960s and 1970s is the foundational change on which many subgenres of crime fiction are based including the introduction of the female forensic pathologist as a new persona of the detective. This shift is key to read how texts by women about women remapped the masculine space of crime narratives and allowed for new themes and critical perspectives. It will be argued here that by challenging the marginality of the female role and the patriarchal authority at the center of the male-centered genre, the female detective is an addition that presents various dimensions in the crime stories to redefine gender roles and gendered violence, hence foreshadowing the space where forensic crime fiction can be read. It will be shown in this article that female representation in the detective novel, particularly in forensic crime fiction opens a window to investigate critical issues such as power, social critique, female agency and violence in what a traditionally known as a male dominated genre. With women holding up a mirror to the developments and changes in society, they showcase the various facets of female representations among which is the introduction of the female forensic pathologist as she occupies the new role of the detective.

Forensic Crime Fiction and the Female Pathologist

Forensic Crime Fiction is a subgenre of crime fiction that explores the scientific aspects of the crime investigation. Featuring characters such as medical examiners, pathologists, and forensic scientists, the texts in this subgenre focus on the

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processes and technologies of the investigation that center on the body. It combines the gritty reality of the hardboiled world with the precision and scientific procedures of forensics. From Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle who incorporated elements of forensics in their work, forensic crime fiction evolved into a subgenre that shifts attention away from the lone private-eye to a world of professional forensic and criminological sciences, bodies on exam tables and precise processes of evidence collection. With books by female authors such as Patricia Cornwell and Kathy Reichs, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of medical and forensic books, which spiked the popularity of this subgenre. As Joy Palmer claims, the "explosion in the popularity" of these books foregrounds a new form of crime writing that focuses on the "anatomical or medicalized body" and the "technologies of forensic detection" (2001, p.54). Since detective fiction deals with crime, particularly murder, the use of forensic sciences provides the means not only to solve the mystery and identify the criminal but also formulate the crime narrative and the story of the victim. Forensic sciences have myriad uses which are referenced in crime fiction as they are concerned with

> the study of human remains in forensic medicine or forensic anthropology, the study of criminal behavior in forensic psychology or profiling, and the examination of evidence or criminalistics. Criminalistics uses a variety of scientific processes to answer questions relating to biological evidence; trace evidence; impression evidence, such as fingerprints, footprints, tire tracks, and bloodstains; controlled substances; ballistics; and other evidence. (Kaspar, 2024)

Therefore, at the heart of forensic crime narratives is the identification of the suspect/criminal as well as pursuing justice through reconstructing the story of the victim told via the dead body. Forensic crime fiction is also attached to the "demonstration of the power invested in certain forensic devices embodied in the figure of the literary detective" (Thomas, 1999, p.2). In this regard, Thomas names examples of these devices "the fingerprint, the mug shot, or the lie detector, for example - all of which enable the detective to read the clues to a mystery that is written in the suspect body" (Thomas, 1999, p.2).

In novels representative of feminist forensic crime fiction (for example, the series written by Kathy Reichs and Patritia Cornwell), the female protagonist doubles as a detective/forensic pathologist, and her role often stands in conflict with the male detective/policemen. The narratives with a female pathologist/detective position the male detective/policeman who approaches the investigation with authority and toughness against the female pathologist who uses science to speak for the victim. The power that the forensic pathologist is endowed with is shown in the way her judgment and analysis render the final say in deciding the results of the investigation. There is a distinctive female gaze in the fiction of Kathy Reichs, for example, that features a forensic anthropologist protagonist, Temperance Brennan who constructs stories from 'bones' to solve murders. As Ingrida Povidiša maintains, bones "assume

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a central position within the texture of the narrative and in the visual depiction of the stories, they are read - understood, interpreted, exploited and embodied/in-bodied" (2008, p. 2). Patritia Cornwell's medical examiner, Kay Scarpetta, on the other hand, reads female dead bodies for clues to reveal the identity of their serial killer. In The Body Farm (1994), for example, Scarpetta states "no one respects the dead more than those of us who work with them and hear their silent stories. The purpose is to help the living" (1994, p.332).

This article examines forensic crime fiction in relation to the representation of women and the process of detection. It investigates how the women in forensic crime fiction negotiate female roles in the context of policing and the legal institutions in which they are placed. Analyzing the perceptions and expectations surrounding the female protagnist and her agency modes, it will be argued here that forensic crime fiction operates as an alternative to the masculine hardboiled narrative for it reveals the transgressive potential of the female forensic pathologist as a detective. It will be shown here that the female forensic pathologist, representing a formal authority and carrying power over the bodies she examines, professionalizes the female role of the detective, and therefore she is not only an equal to the male detective/policeman but sometimes she has the upper hand with the way her judgment and views are used to solve the crime. She translates the 'body' rendering information for the police and the legal system, hence re-anchoring female experience in the genre in science. Another aspect in the female representation as a medical examiner/forensic pathologist at the heart of the argument of this article is that women in this role are transgressive; their knowledge, expertise and authority can be seen as a threat to the male detective/policeman, which destabilizes the portrayal of gender roles. Women in their professional capacity challenge the overall authority of the male detective and they also surpass it by using science as a weapon. The focus of this article is on Patritia Cornwell's protagonist, Kay Scarpetta, the chief medical examiner in the Scarpetta series. I argue that she is transgressive as she she subverts the legal system via a complicated relationship with the police and challenges the generic conventions of the crime novel. It will be shown that Patritia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta embodies the transformations in the genre through narratives that reveal a new perspective to envisioning the female protagonist as a detective, the shift in detection and its procedures, and the positionality of the female forensic scientist against legal and police institutions.

Forensic Crime Fiction: Women and the body

In traditional detective fiction, the detective and the forensic pathologist are usually males in narratives that favor the male gaze centering on a female corpse. The male detective/forensic scientist reduces the female body to photographs and tags of evidence to solve the crime. There are rituals in the detection processes that are associated with the male gaze and the silent female body (Álvarez, 2016, p. 3). However, the introduction of feminist crime fiction with a female detective as a heroine has created a shift in the way the female role is portrayed. Most interestingly the female body (the corpse) in forensic crime fiction is used as a means for

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subversion— the female bodies "allow for a challenging of traditional modes of representation and traditional discourses, so that both female authors and female audiences can negotiate new ways of seeing and constructing their bodily identities" (Álvarez, 2016, p. 3). The female forensic pathologist also has a different lens to the body she examines, and although she deals with torn mutilated bodies, which requires her to have a distance and use science to create detachment and compartmentalize her emotions, there is also a more empathetic gaze than that of the male's. For example, Kay Scarpetta has a compassionate view to the bodies she deals with. In *The Last Precinct*, she explains that the "female should not be an adjective. Nobody talks about successful men in terms of a male doctor or male president or male CEO" (2000, p.138).

The body thus becomes a central character and all the efforts the medical examiner exerts are focused on the clues that the body offers. The identity of the perpetrator, the story of what happened to the victim, and the investigation itself all depend on the forensics and evidence collected from the dead body. The investigating processes involving the body present complexities and intrinsicses that formulate the main plotlines in forensic crime narratives. With a long list of procedures such as blood, fiber and DNA tests, collection of evidence via technologies that help the investigation, the body has a primary place that is center stage amongst all these forensics. The "curious and emblematic role" of forensic crime narratives is to interrogate the "bio-social, technical, and philosophical dimensions of the body, mediating posthuman anxieties about its fragmentation" (Bhattacharjee, 2025, p.141). As such, the body becomes the text, and it renders signifiers to be examined and analyzed. On the one hand, the body serves as the 'victim' as it narrates the story of the person who was killed while using science to develop the crime narrative when the body is studied, probed and explored for evidence. But the silent body on the table of the medical examiner gains more power as it speaks for the dead person/victim and tells the crime story. For example, in Cornwell's series, the reader shares the experience of the female protagonist, Kay Scarpetta when she autopsies a female body, there is sorrow and helplessness at the sight of a corpse, but there are also precise scientific steps that Scarpetta follows. In *Point of Origin,* Scarpetta explains:

> After several minutes of a constant warm bath, I began to very slowly and gently separate the thick broken glass from the dead woman's face, the skin pulling and distorting as I peeled, making her all the more horrible to look at. Fielding and I worked in silence for a while, gently laying shards and sections of heat-stressed glass tub. This took about an hour, and when we were done, the stench was stronger. What was left of the poor woman seemed more pitiful and small, and the damage to her head was even more striking. (Cornwell, 1998, p.103)

As Horsley and Horsely suggest, each "body provides an individual pathway to the abyss of violence and death, and with every mise en abîme there is an inevitable communion. The dead body inspires in the living protagonist nightmares of self-

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division, of gothic doubling and boundaries violated" (2006, p.3). It is the forensic pathologist's job to read the information, clues and references that the body provides. The female body in particular becomes a canvas for the detective/forensic pathologist to put together a crime story, and serves as "instigators of narrative causality" (Plain, 2001, p. 31), As Tejaswinee Bhattacharjee argues, forensic crime texts

> embody the trauma of reality, prominently featuring the idea of the "body-as signifier." This concept is explored semiotically (the body as text) and phenomenologically as well as psychoanalytically (the body as image), attempting to reconstruct a fiction of corporeal presence in response to the physical body's fragmentation. (2025, p.141)

What Jill Palin calls "the literal body of the corpse" (2001, p.12), especially that of a woman carries a particular significance in a genre that relies on power dynamics and the play of gender roles. In this regard, Elisabeth Bronfen points to the fascination of western culture and literature with the dead female body. With the "equation between femininity and death" where the "beautiful woman is killed to produce an artwork" (Bronfen 1992, pp. 72–3), the female body reveals the fears and anxieties surrounding female roles. Additionally, there is an element of mystery in detective narratives that links death and femininity generating an interest to uncover 'truth' not merely about the crime story but about the female corpse in itself.

However, forensic crime stories have shifted emphasis from the death of a beautiful woman to the female body as evidence. In her article "Forensic Science and Forensic Thrillers: A Feminist Perspective on the Re/Presenation of The Female Corpse", Elena Avanzas Álvarez argues that the feminist forensic thriller has changed the positing of the female corpse suggesting the female forensic specialist played a role in retelling the story of the female body (Álvarez, 2016, p.2). Mizejeweski (2001) also stresses the importance of the body and what it represents from its discovery in the crime scene to what it reveals as evidence, particularly how the body serves a purpose in the legal system. Consquently, the forensic pathologist

> reconstitute[s] a narrative by reassembling the fragmented body parts – recontaining the horror, reconstructing the abject body, negotiating amongst different possible scriptings of the victim's fate, reincorporating the body within a narrative structure that will rescue it from abjection (Horsley and Horsley, 2006, p.20)

Therefore, in forensic crime narratives, what Miglė Anušauskaitė calls "investigator-criminal-victim dynamics" (2016, p.136) relies on multiple roles of the body, and with the intersections between the criminal, victim and medical examiner, these roles become more fluid, and the lines between them blurry. However, the tensions between the "investigator and the criminal constitute a pair of opponents and their 'conflict'" (Anušauskaitė, 2016, p.136). This conflict is at the heart of the forensic crime narrative that relies on the connectedness between legal and medical discourses,

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as the next section will illustrate.

Forensic crime fiction: The legal and the medical intertwined

The subgenre of forensic crime fiction presents meeting points between medical and legal discourses in a variety of ways. With the focus on crime, forensic crime narratives engage the criminal justice system and the legal processes involved in the investigation. But forensic crime narratives also center on medical procedures as pertains to autopsies and forensics, hence shaping how crime, violence, identity and the body are used in narratives that aim at crime resolution. Since its beginning, detective fiction focuses on a private eye working along or against the police and legal authorities using physical clues and evidence to solve the mystery. Sherlock Holmes is a prime example of this model of detection, and even in the early hardboiled genre, detectives such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe search for clues to solve the crime and work alongside law enforcement. However, with the development of the crime novel and the addition of other subgenres such as the serial killer narrative, the focus has shifted to internal monologues, character development and internal conflict; as in, for example, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* and Robert Bloch's *Psycho*. What forensic crime fiction has succeeded to introduce is a combination of scientific gaze and psychological exploration and profiling of crime, with the the body often taking center stage in the investigation.

With the focus on the corpse, the medicalization of crime changed not only the plot and themes of detective narratives but also the lens through which crime is presented and solved. Framing crime and criminal behavior within pathological frameworks shifts attention from the legal process of the pursuit of justice in the criminal justice system to the medical arena where the focus on the explanations behind crime is colored with medical diagnoses and analyses. Hence, instead of investigating the sociocultural and political patterns of crime, scientific/medical processes are favored to come up with explanations in forensic crime texts. The female gaze is another factor in the interplay between gender and medical forensics in this subgenre. The female pathologist combines the scientific objective analysis that she conducts with an empathetic lens to the body she is tasked to examine. Technology becomes key to decode story of the 'body' to solve the crime, construct the story of the victim and identify the criminal. The female pathologist is placed against a criminal justice system where she struggles to find her place. The goal to Mizejeweski is to

> restore order through the justice system. But the usual machineries of justice—investigators, police, the legal system—are overwhelmingly filled with masculine, white, heterosexual bodies—an old-boys network, shot through with suspicion of women. When she does appear in the traditional story, the woman

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shows up as a body—if not the victim, then the seductress or suspect. (Mizejeweski, 2001, pp.12-13)

This interplay between medical science and criminology is key to read gender roles and power dynamics in forensic crime narratives. It recasts the medical examiner as a detective and at the same time a diagnostician who delivers the evidence and the verdict on the crime mystery, thus reimagining the detective and women's roles in this subgenre. Narratives of forensic crime fiction resort to using technology to read the body and render results – from fingerprints to photography and testing, forensic crime narratives increasingly rely on the advancements and intricacies in medical technology. This undercuts the traditional legal processes of collecting cluses and evidence that the police or the detective usually performs. Instead, the pursuit of physical evidence via DNA, for example, has "strengthened the cultural, disciplinary, and legal reputation of forensic science" (Dauncey 2010, p. 165). The "cultural-historical shift in thinking about evidence" reveals the "increasing stature of the discipline and provides an opening for its further expansion" (Dauncey 2010, p. 165). The analysis provided by the medical examiner can be seen to point to "comparisons with the coercive narratives of the official machinery of law and order" which takes the form of a female heroine who, like the male detective, ultimately works on resorting order; she is "speaking in a voice that is conditioned and contained by the patriarchal structures within which the forensic pathologist must operate" (Horsely and Horsely, 2006, p.13). However, it is argued here that Patritia Cornwell's forensic novels offer a subversive reading of the relationship between the medical examiner (Kay Scarpetta) and law enforcement. There is a transgressive dimension to the position of the female forensic pathologist as a figure who crosses to the patriarchal world of law and order and at the same time has her own reading of the bodies she examines. The forensic pathologist constructs medical narratives about the crimes that are used as evidence in the criminal justice system, which is evident in Cornwell's Scarpetta series as will be discussed in the final section of this article.

Postmortem Bodies and the Female Detective/Medical Examiner in Patricia Cornwell's Scarpetta series

As one of the pioneering authors in forensic crime fiction, Patricia Cornwell reinvented the subgenre and added to the depth and breadth of its themes and techniques. Introducing Kay Scarpetta, her protagonist who is featured as the chief medical examiner in Virginia, Cornwell revolutionized the crime novel and achieved a massive success selling over 120 million copies. With her forensic crime narratives, Cornwell shifted focus from the traditional detection and the figure of the detective and law enforcement to the world of forensics, technology and science used to solve the mysteries. This paved the way to the explosion of SCI and medical thrillers on TV, which gained more popularity in the last few decades. Indeed, Cornwell broke the mold of the masculine hardboiled crime fiction by introducing a skilled and professional female forensic pathologist who is at the heart of her thrillers.

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Cornwell is known for her detailed accounts of medical practices and pathological criminology. With lengthy descriptions of the procedures that her medical examiner performs, Cornwell's work uses forensic medical and scientific knowledge as a means to establish plotlines and build stories around crime resolution, hence "valoriz[ing] the authority of the main character" and serving as "convention of realism, and it provides a supposedly stable field of reference by which identity and evidence can be measured, recognized, and named" (Mizejewski, 2001, p.6). The centrality of the body, especially the female body, is palpable in Cornwell's narratives while the use of graphic and scientific realism is the key to portray the specific and often gruesome descriptions of the crime. The focus on violent and sexual crime is also attached to the positionality of the body to flesh out gendered violence especially in Cornwell's stories that feature serial killers with women as targets (for example, her first 1990 novel *Postmortem*). Cornwell proves her protagonist, Kay Scarpetta to have an understanding and empathy for the female bodies she examines. Commenting on the murder case of a woman she is working on, Scarpetta says, "The dead are defenseless, and the violation of this woman, like the others, had only begun. I knew it would not end until Lori Petersen was turned inside out, every inch of her photographed, and all of it on display for experts, the police, attorneys, judges and members of a jury to see" (Cornwell, 1990, p.8) . Scarpetta also points to the cultural obsession with women's dead bodies and the fascination with stories of murdered women, hence criticizing the palpable sexist frameworks of crime against women not only in relation to her work as a medical examiner but also more broadly in culture:

> Nobody who counts gives a damn when women are raped and murdered! The same bastards who work the cases go out on the town and watch movies about women being raped, strangled, slashed. To them it's sexy. They like to look at it in magazines. They fantasize. They probably get their rocks off by looking at the scene photographs. (Cornwell, 1990, p.248)

Scarpetta here offers sharp critique to the legal as well as social institutions that are concerned with fighting crime. Her position against the "bastards" who glorify and "fantasize" about murdered women shows the challenges and the struggles she faces in her work environment with the police and in society at large. In the first four novels (*Postmortem* (1990), *Body of Evidence* (1991), *All That Remains* **(**1992) and *Cruel and Unusual* (1993)), the FBI is part of the cases she investigates, but in later work Kay Scarpetta becomes a consultant to the FBI and works alongside FBI agents to solve crimes. The Scarpetta series presents a connection between profiling and forensic pathological work; the police investigations rely on legal and policing structures that employ traditional investigational devices, and these are set against the medical examiner's forensic work which hinges on precise scientific procedures. This conflict manifests itself in the contrast between the objectivity and accuracy involved in the pursuit of evidence in the forensic investigations Scarpetta conducts versus the bureaucracy and politics that define police investigations. This conflict is also

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displayed in the way Scarpetta's work is undermined by colleagues and rivals in the police department. In novels such as *Postmortem* and *Trace*, Scarpetta's authority is undercut by policemen she works with and the city officials who sabotage the investigation when they leak information to the press, faking evidence and other actions that point to the precarious position of the female medical examiner in the legal system.

The setting of the Scarpetta series is another important aspect of Cornwell's forensic crime narratives as the setting shapes the crime scene and and the resolution of the mystery, but it also establishes the procedural aspect of the stories. The stories surrounding the life experience of the medical examiner invite the reader to the world of technologies, procedures and autopsies, but at the same time allow to negotiate the representational dynamics of gender roles in the workplace, violence, power and agency. The focus on the clinical and procedural aspect of the crime puzzle to be solved via the body on the medical examiner's table expresses a broader cultural fascination with "forensic pathology, which is the bioscience of criminal investigation, and for profiling, its behavioral science" (Mizejewski, 2001, p.10). Cornwell's series shows the work of policing agencies as well as the medical clinical work in Scarpetta's office. The evidence is physical and is analyzed thorough the body, but there are also psychological and profiling elements in the stories. Scarpetta is on a par with the male detectives due to her "intellectual abilities, logical powers as well as the brilliant imagination or inition of the classical detective" (Vidal- Farré, 2012, p. 53). It is also noteworthy to mention that Kay Scarpetta is not only a doctor, but she also earned a law degree; she is a double threat that represents the two worlds of science and law enforcement. With her deductions and analysis of crime scenes and her determination to solve the crime, she is presented on equal footing with the detective and the police. Her forensic knowledge, professionalism and her use of technology shape the fictional world forensic crime fiction and detective fiction more broadly.

Scarpetta's identity is thus in question. She states, "I was a woman who was not a woman. I was the body and sensibilities of a woman with the power and drive of a man" (1994, p.358). This quote from Kay Scarpetta reveals the conflicting ideas around gender roles and identity and the prime position of the body, both the forensic pathologist's body and the bodies she examines. Scarpetta distinguishes herself from other detectives in the way she deals with victims' bodies. The stories show Scarpetta's renowned career and all the challenges she faced along the way. Not only was Scarpetta the "chief of the most prominent medical examiner system in the United States" but she also had immense experience by performing autopsies "thousands of them" as well as doing "research studies on violence –sexual violence, drug-related violence, domestic violence– all kinds of violence" (Cornwell, 2005, p.97).

Conwell thus creates a complex character in Scarpetta. As a protagonist who is featured in twenty-nine books, Scarpetta evolves and shows different sides to her. The first books of the Scarpetta series are thrillers that rely on identifying criminals and pursuing evidence. Her later "darker" stories, however, are based on the female

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protagonist's "offences, such as "scientific arrogance, official insensitivity, voyeuristic fascination, and even violent proclivities" (Horsley and Horsley, 2006, p. 4). The trauma and loss Scarpetta experiences turn her into "hardened veteran" who does not work by the book in the later novels. Cornwell portrays the struggles her female protagonist experiences both in terms of her trauma and people's reaction to her (Horsley and Horsley, 2006, p. 4). For example, in *In All That Remains* (1992), Scarpetta is not allowed to enter a crime scene by a police officer who could not reconcile with the fact the chief medical examiner in the state is a woman. The frameworks of the investigation and crime scenes are dictated by a male-dominated mindset where she is not readily accepted by her male colleagues and even her judgement and analysis are colored by sexist politics.

Cornwell, however, details Kay Scarpetta's work demonstrating the expertise and skills of her female protagonist. With the body as the center of the female medical examiner's work, the Scarpetta series reveals that the pursuit of justice depends on technologies, forensics to unlock the story of the victim, but this is not without the politics and interferences from the police and the male-dominated legal system. The female investigator genre, as Mizejewski explains challenges the "notion of the body as site of truth" because of the "transgressive" female having the roles traditionally taken by men (2001, p.6). The Scarpetta series provides many examples of how ambiguous, fragmented and inexplicable the body can be. Indeed, there are many readings of the body in the Scarpetta series that encompass forensic, clinical, cultural and psychological dimensions. The body of the protagonist as well as the bodies she examines offer compound readings that stand in contrast with the notion of having a unified and coherent notion of "the body." This "body doubling" involves "a cultural ideal, a perceived lack, and a substitution" (Mizejewski, 2001, p8). From *Postmortem*, Cornwell's first book in the Scarpetta series, Cornwell continued to build the foundation for the forensic crime novel. In a story about the assault and strangulation of four women by a serial killer whom Scarpetta pursues through the evidence she obtains via the bodies of the dead women, *Postmortem* speaks to the psychology of the serial killer and the violence against women and how the medical examiner uses cutting-edge technologies to identify the killer. In this regard, Horsley and Horsely argue that Scarpetta's relationship with the corpse is "intimate, even maternal" (2006, p.18). Scarpetta, according to this view, reproduces the body both as a physical entity that speaks for the victim and as a representation of sociocultural anxieties, a juncture that points to a "gendered contrast in the investigative serial killer novel, that is, between male (mind-centred) and female (body-centred) versions of the subgenre" (Horsely and Horsley, 2006, p.19). Indeed, the Scarpetta series exposes the conflict that her narratives dissect; the identity and the story of the monstrous criminal/serial killer stand against these of the victim, and these stories are reconstructed and told by the medical examiner. As Sabine Vanacker argues, Scarpetta "crossed the limits of her gender role" and instead of being confined to a role "culturally associated (as female) with life and life giving", Scarpetta as a "woman hero is a dealer in death" (1997: 65-66).

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Scarpetta's role as a professional capable detective also stands in contrast to her identity as a woman. She is presented as a divorced woman with no children and her relationship with her niece, Lucy, is presented as an alternative to being a biological mother. Scarpetta clashes with her sister, Dorothy, Lucy's mother who is shown to be uncaring mother. Scarpetta takes the responsibility of looking after her niece, Lucy who went through traumatic childhood and her mother's abonnement, and she grows into quite a volatile genius. Bretha who takes care of Lucy while Scarpetta is at work describes the child: "Been bad, Dr Kay. That child been in your office all day banging on that computer of yours." Then delivers the judgement: "She just upset because you had to work" (Cornwell, 1990, p.35). Scarpetta's response is acceptance, not denial or anger, but a kind of quiet acceptance which reflects the precarious position where Cornwell places her medical examiner in terms of gender roles and sexuality. She is set against what seems like high standards at her workplace but she is also not meeting the requirements of the role of the traditional mother. As Anne Cranny-Francis puts it: "[i]f the female detective should lose her femininity, should not be somehow specifically female, then the difficult exercise of creating a female hero loses all value" (1990, p.166).

On the positioning of the Cornwell's female protagonist in the subgenre, there is a body of scholarship that stresses how Cornwell employs more conservative outlook to crime, a view I take issue with. For example, Palmer suggests that Cornwell presents an "ambivalent attitude towards gender and sexuality" despite the fact that she features an intelligent and independent female heroine in Kay Scarpetta. According to this view, Cornwell becomes an "unlikely candidate for 'sister in crime'" and her conversative treatment of criminality forecloses a subversive reading of her work (Palmer, 2001, p. 57). Another example of a conservative reading of Cornwell is provided by Jane Tomc. Examining the Scarpetta series, Tomc stipulates that the female protagonist is presented as a "persecuted member of some huge law enforcement agency" who encounters the sexism and prejudice within the institution. Via her protagonist, Cornwell sheds light on "institutionalized, endemic character of violence against women" (Tomc, 1995, p.51), but Cornwell does not endow her heroine with power, according to this reading. Tomc argues that Cornwell establishes a "compensatory logic that strives, however contradictorily, to reconcile the detective to her intolerable circumstances" (Tomc 1995, p.51). Positioning Cornwell against feminist writers such as Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, and Marcia Muller, Cornwell's detective is seen as stripped of choices and is forced to tolerate the conditions under which she works.

These readings strip Scarpetta of her agency. However, I would argue that the positionality of Kay Scarpetta in the subgenre is an indicator of the complexity and diversity of forensic crime narratives and provides a feminist reading of the lead female role against the grain. The juncture of reading of Cornwell's work through a feminist lens allows to examine her work in light of subversion and transgression. That is, Kay Scarpetta opens a space to read the subversive role of the female heroine who is neither the topotypical femme fatale nor a victim. The quick dismissal of Cornwell's work as conservative or not fulfilling the feminist potential is hasty at

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best, if not inaccurate. At the heart of the subversive understanding of Scarpetta's role is her crossing the lines of the well-marked gender roles. Not only does she challenge the masculine boundaries of the job suited for men, but she departs from the female role of the life giver and instead deals primarily with death. This woman "aggressively 'manhandles' the corpses of victims and gruesomely thrives off decaying and decomposing bodies" (Vanacker 1997: 65-66). A woman working in a male-dominated field problematizes not only the masculine space of the genre but also facilitates a feminist reading of the female protagonist. Via Kay Scarpetta, Cornwell reveals the intriguing link between the independent woman who works in science and the victims she examines, thus showcasing that Scarpetta's identity is defined by "feminist ideals" that aim to "deconstruct the patriarchal conception of women as dependant on men by means of depicting the terrible consequences patriarchy brings about" (Farré-Vidal, 2012, p. 60). Scarpetta builds an impressive career despite the sexism she faces at work, and her stories reveal the complexities srrounding women in the workplace especially when they are in the position of power.

Conclusion

Feminist forensic crime fiction has reimagined the generic conventions of crime fiction with female protagonists playing the primary role of the detective, which challenges the tropes of the traditional detective novel and redefines gender roles and gendered violence. Feminist writers problematized a traditionally masculine-focused genre to create a female space for narratives that feature women in new and creative ways. The female medical examiner/detective is "doubly suspect as woman in the man's place, female authority in a male legal/ police world" (Mizejewski, 2001, p.11). This female heroine is shaped by feminist ideals that expose a male-dominated society and the marginalization of women in a variety of contexts. But she also invites the reader into a journey of assessing and assereting cpmplex concepts and connections between femininity, agency, equality, justice, detection and gendered violence.

Patritia Cornwell is a prime example where the intersections between legal and medical discourses are revealed through her protagonist chief medical examiner, Kay Scarpetta. Cornwell, via her protagonist, brings forth all the multifaceted and complicated aspects of gender and crime in her forensic crime novels. Cornwell's plots that center on medical forensics, technologies, and investigations of the body allow a new approach to detection. The Scarpetta series reveals conflicts and tension in gender politics and gender roles, which requires rereading and reevaluating the position of the body, especially the female body in the series. Through her protagonist, Cornwell creates "a central intelligence which is empowered to speak directly about the body as witness to truth […] Scarpetta's unmediated access to the traumatized corpse endows her with the almost unchallengeable authority that comes with intimate knowledge of the unbearable and unthinkable" (Horsley and Horsely, 2006, pp.1-2)

Ultimately, what the subgenre of forensic crime fiction succeeds to do is shifting female roles from passive victims to intelligent experts who have expertise and authority over the crime scene and the processes of detection and crime

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resolution. By humanizing the female scientist, forensic crime fiction reveals both the success and the challenges at the heart of events in the stories. Forensic crime narratives, therefore, expose sexism in the workplace, but at the same time show the power of women in a male dominated field. By so doing, forensic crime fiction allows for a subversive reading of women's roles and their agency.

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