

# Amanda cross and the female sleuth

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Merriam-Webster dictionary defines sleuth as a slang word for sleuthhound or detective who follows a trail to uncover a mystery, crime or unknown variable. In literature mystery is defined as a distinct subgenre of detective fiction in which an unknown event, often a disappearance or murder, causes the stories protagonist, or main character in the story, to solve the crime or mystery. Mysteries do not require crimes or the assistance of law enforcement as the common detective fiction or whodunit but they do depend on an unknown variable that the protagonist must determine, (NationMaster, 2003).

Mystery fiction is not a new genre of story telling. Throughout time man has been interested in solving the riddles of life. So much so that there is significant evidence to indicate that civilization has enjoyed a good mystery as far back as Ancient Egypt and Greece. However, it was Edgar Allan Poe and his first published story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* published in the mid-nineteenth century that made mystery fiction the popular brand of novel it is today. *The Murder in the Rue Morgue* first appeared in *Graham's Magazine*, (Mystery Network, n. d. ).

After Poe there have been a number of influential mystery writers including Wilkie Collins, also known as the father of the mystery, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Scottish author of the *Sherlock Holmes* series. *Sherlock Holmes* is not only one of the most widely known mystery series but is also considered to be the most famous literary figures in history, (Mystery Network). Holmes was first introduced to readers in *The Strand Magazine* when they published the story “ *A Study in Scarlet*. ” Edward Stratemeyer, the author of both the

Hardy Boy's and Nancy Drew series of juvenile mysteries, Carolyn Keene and Agatha Christie.

Amanda Cross is a twentieth century mystery writer who contributed much to the genre. Her semi-feminist voice transformed the common sleuth from a run-of-mill private detective into a strong willed female literature professor. Cross, who was struggling with gender equality issues at the University of New York, was tired of the tried and true mystery novels that were being produced a-dime-a-dozen. She set out to produce mysteries that are intelligent and contain a role model worthy protagonist. Cross is the pen name of Carolyn Heilbrun.

Her first novel, *In the Last Analysis*, features Kate Fansler, the female sleuth featured in a 14 book series. Fansler is a witty and highly educated literature professor at the prestigious New York University and the majority of her adventures are set against an academic background. Fansler, as opposed to traditional detectives, solves the crime through interviews and conversations with those involved. Most of the mysteries involve the death of either a student or professor and it is up to Fansler to solve the crime. In *The Last Analysis*, Fansler recommends Janet Harrison see psychoanalyst Dr. Emmanuel Bauer.

Bauer is a friend and former lover of Fansler's. However, shortly after starting sessions with Bauer, Harrison is found shot to death on his couch. Fansler is on the case to prove that her friend is innocent. However, Harrison has led an elusive life in which she has very few friends or acquaintances, making it hard for Fansler to track down a possible killer. However, Fansler's knowledge of Freudian concepts and her personal integrity helps her to catch

the killer. Although Heilbrun strays from the norm her first novel is typical of an amateur-detective mystery. Fansler knows a crime has been committed.

She seeks information pertinent to the case by following leads and seeking information from those involved. Fansler then comes up with a theory about what happens, which proves to be correct. Also typical is the fact that the protagonist is a strong female character. Throughout Heilbrun's novels Fansler is portrayed as strong independent woman, much like Heilbrun. She enjoys eating and drinking and marries later in life. Fansler differs from a majority of female protagonists in mystery fictions because she solves the mystery through Freudian analysis and personal interviews.

This is a mystery of the mind in which Fansler does not have physical clues that lead her to find the real killer. Other mystery writers have used female protagonists as well. Contemporary author Nevada Barr features the female protagonist Anna Pigeon, a national park ranger who leads the reader through various adventures in the backcountry solving mysterious deaths. Pigeon is similar to Fansler in the sense that they are both independent modern women. They are both professionals who solve mysteries within the backdrop of their chosen profession.

Pigeon and Fansler both represent strong female characters. Yet, Pigeon represents a more traditional character in modern mystery fiction since she follows a trail of clues left behind by the murders as opposed to using literary and psychoanalytical clues to solve the mystery. Similarly well known mystery writer Sue Grafton began her alphabetical mystery series with A is for Alibi. In her mystery fiction protagonist Kinsey Malone represents a

courageous and sassy female private eye. Grafton too takes a more traditional approach by utilizing a private investigator as the main character.

Others authors such as Sandra de Helen utilize logic and facts to solve mysteries as opposed to following physical clues. De Helen's novel *The Hounding* features two female detectives Shirley Combs and Mrs. Mary Watson. De Helen has a series planned surrounding the two who is in some way related to Sherlock Holms and his assistant Watkins and they solve crimes similarly. These characters all follow typical mystery genre traditions. But not all mystery writers follow tradition. Sue Grafton, a well known mystery writer, started an alphabetical mystery series in which murders are solved by a female feline and a small dog.

Grafton strays away far from tradition with characters but stays within the realm with the practices that her characters use to unravel the crimes. Different writers use different methods of crime solving as well as types of characters. However, there is a pattern of female mystery writers creating professional and strong female protagonists. Most of the main characters in modern mystery writers today have had to overcome obstacles in a male-dominated world. They often face genderdiscriminationor stereotypical peers that create obstacles that must be overcome.

For example, Ellen Godfrey's protagonist Jane Tregar is tough and feisty. Tregar, a professional working in a search firm, has had to battle her way up the corporate ladder to a senior position in an executive firm. She utilizes technical know-how to uncover information and corporate savvy to survive her male peers and their scrutiny as well as solve mysteries and be successful in the male-dominated business world. Another modern author

Sara Paretsky, currently extremely popular with mystery readers, has created the protagonist V. I. Warshawski.

Warshawski broke ground as the first female in an all male dominated world of the dangerous back streets of Chicago. Warshawski proves that women can be tough and sensitive and that physical difference between men and women do not mean that women are not capable of performing well in dangerous situations. In the Last Analysis, Fansler fully understands the plight of women within the world of academia. “ Kate was startled by Professor Anderson, who was an eighteenth-century man with a strong distaste for all female writers since Jane Austen (Cross, 2001, p. 3).

” This is a common war in the literary department. Literature has been male dominated for a number of years. This is caused in large by the fact that women were not taught to read or write for centuries. However, as women have begun to take their seat at the head of English departments across the nation male peers may scoff. There is a large portion of male literary enthusiast who tries to minimize the female impact on literature today. Heilbrun later retired early from her post at the University of New York to avoid dealing with this same type of professional peer.

But gender discrimination and differences are not the only ones that haunt Heilbrun. Age also seems to be a factor. Heilbrun laments that her students are young and full of life and the longing for their own futures. However, as a professor years goes by and nothing changes. “ Spring on an American campus, even an Urban a campus as this one, inevitably drove the faculty into a mood of lassitude, irritation and fastidiousness. Perhaps it is because

we are getting old, while the students, like the Caesar's crowds on Appian Way, are always the same age.

Gazing at the students who sprawled or made love on every patch of available grass, Kate longed, as she did every spring for a statelier, less untidy era, (Cross, 2001, p. 3). " Heilbrun used Fansler to express her own apprehensions about aging as well as the endless cycle of youth that professors endure each college enrollment period. Heilbrun did not reveal her herself as the author of the Amanda Heilbrun mysteries until she was offered tenure at the University due to her fear of criticism from her peers and having her literary work interfere with her academic work.

However, age criticism may have also been a concern. The idea of age is transcendent in Heilbrun's mysteries. Fansler is already in her forties at the start of *In the Last Analysis* and has never been married nor does she have children. Although latter in the series she does marry she has no concerns about being a " homemaker" or playing into any other typical stereotypes of women. In fact Fansler, although discreet, has a number of lovers. The idea of the woman as a non-maternal figure breaks social traditions. But the primary social concern of *In the Last Analysis* surrounds professional ethics and human integrity.

Throughout Heilbrun's series there are two main characters, Fansler and her friend and future husband Reed Amhearst. Fansler is old-fashion yet she has a penchant for martinis and she comes from a background of wealthy parents to supplement her teacher's salary. This is convenient since she does not seem to work much as she uncovers her friend's innocence. As she tries to prove her friend's innocence she solicits the help of Amhearst, an attorney,

who goes out of his way to help Fansler and repay her a favor. Amhearst is portrayed as Fansler's love interest and a protect figure.

Throughout the book, *In the Last Analysis*, Amhearst tries to caution the headstrong Fansler who gets involved despite his warnings. Fansler even goes so far as to put her reputation and career on the line to prove that Bauer, her friend, is innocent. Her old-fashion sensibilities coupled with a reckless and courageous manner makes Fansler a great candidate to become an amateur sleuth and enforce the idea of human integrity. There are several other examples of human integrity in the book as characters assist Fansler in solving the case. Heilbrun's novels have been successful overall.

However, she was criticized. Especially for her first book, *In the Last Analysis*, in which it is obvious that Heilbrun has yet to fine tune her technique. Although professional news agencies such as *The New York Times* had positive reviews a number of readers felt Heilbrun tried too hard to present Fansler as smart and independent. Thus she came across as being pretentious. However, after her first novel the series gained in popularity in part due to the fact that her subsequent novels take place within the world of academia and Fansler's character can put her intellect to better use.

In conclusion, Heilbrun has made a significant contribution to the mystery fiction genre. She is the first mystery writer to create a mystery in which the crime must be solved using conversations and analytical skills as opposed to physical clues and traditional evidence. Heilbrun also sets the stage for female authors who create strong and independent protagonists that break the mold of female stereotypes. In keeping with many other female authors



Heilbrun's female protagonists are working in a professional field despite gender inequalities.

Throughout *In the Last Analysis* and other Heilbrun novels there are overtones of age related issues as well as gender differences within the world of academics. Both may reflect challenges that Heilbrun has faced as a Professor at the University of New York. Heilbrun utilizes a common amateur-detective mystery technique yet she strays from the norm by implementing psychoanalytical methods of solving the crime as opposed to relying entirely on physical clues.

In addition to concerns about professional ethics, specifically within the medical field in which patient-client relationships come into question, there is a predominant theme of personal integrity. Integrity is often displayed throughout the novel in the form of personal favors and character's taking risks for each other. Fansler is able to solve the crime using intelligence, Freudian analysis and a little help from her friends. Variations from the common mystery novel include the use of wit and analytical strategies to solve the case as well as the protagonist being an older woman without cause to seek out marriage or family life.

Heilbrun and many of her peers have chosen to expand the image of "detective" to include smart and professional women who are employed outside of the law enforcement or private investigation fields. Although Heilbrun's protagonist is similar to the main characters in other mysteries by her peers, Heilbrun deviates by choosing to make Fansler an example of a non-traditional woman. She is neither interested in marriage or children and has taken a number of lovers to prove her modern values despite an old-

fashion background. Heilbrun paved the way for female mystery writers as well as the female protagonist.

Through her popular series and the popularity of Kate Fansler a whole new genre of mystery books has evolved. These new series feature witty story lines and fast paced plots while featuring strong protagonists and often feminist views. After Heilbrun's success there have been a number of other mystery writers following similar strategies including Nevada Barr, Rita Mae Brown and Sue Grafton. References Cross, A. (2001). In the Last Analysis. : Fawcett. Mystery Network (n. d. ). Evolution of the mystery genre. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2008, from [www. mysterynet. com](http://www.mysterynet.com) NationMaster (2003). : Rapid Intelligence.