

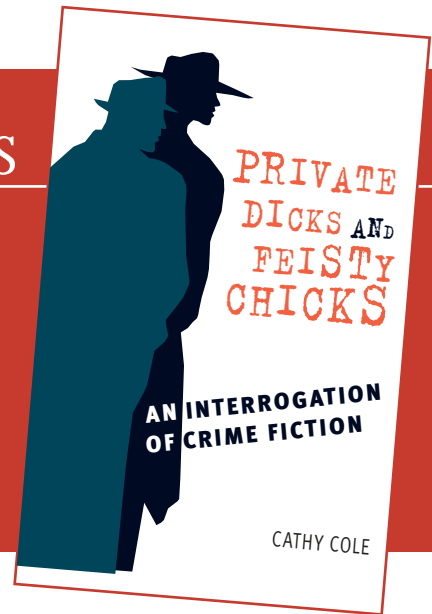
## PRIVATE DICKS AND FEISTY CHICKS

AN INTERROGATION OF CRIME FICTION

Cathy Cole

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*Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* has been reviewed in a wide range of journals and media including the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, both of which stressed its importance as a cultural and study resource:

This lively study has solid foundations: based on thesis research, its author is herself now a published crime novelist. Cathy Cole notes the genre's disproportionate popularity among women, as readers and as writers. And that the central crime-solving character in such works is often female – a feisty, independent one at that. *The Australian*

Cole has read widely, both in crime fiction and in books about crime fiction, she has attended conferences and heard the great contemporary crime fiction writers talking about their work, and this is a very digestible overview of all that research.

Sydney Morning Herald

### PLOT OUTLINE

*Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* is a fast-paced, accessible and authoritative examination of crime fiction and its popularity with readers. Through a series of chapters focusing on various aspects of the genre, the book explores crime fiction's historical genesis in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It traces the ways in which crime has been developing ever since as one of the most potent forms of fiction, especially in its examination of contemporary social and political themes.

### STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

The book contains seven chapters, each of them an examination of the conventions and ideas which underpin the crime genre:

#### 1. The Box under the Bed: on reading and writing crime

The introductory chapter raises questions about crime fiction as a genre. Why the popularity? What makes it different from other forms? How has it developed over the years? What conventions have shapes, and continue to shape the narratives?

#### 2. Bodies, bloodstains and other clues

This chapter examines the role played by the clue in the crime narrative, and particularly the manner in which the reader is drawn actively into the text, as a co-investigator. It questions the manner in which the body is used in murders – how codified so many crime scenes are and how a crime writer approaches this technique. Gender issues are also examined – especially those surrounding the notion of the crime victim.

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## 3. The moral zone of crime fiction

Does morality have a role in contemporary crime texts? This chapter takes the reader through a series of moral issues that form the basis of any interpretation of crime fiction. How much does a reader need to 'see'? Why are crime scenes often so violently graphic or sexually charged? What decisions must a character make in their sleuthing and how does a crime writer establish these moral characteristics? And what of the reader? Why are crime readers drawn to such frightening, violent and painful narratives?

## 4. The characters of crime

Crime fiction is a highly gendered form, often associated with the hard-boiled narratives of Hammett, Chandler and Spillane. But since the 1980s there has been a resurgence in crime fiction written by women and featuring strong female private eyes and police. Women form the bulk of the crime buying and reading public so how much have they influenced or been influenced by this trend? This chapter examines the different characters of crime, from the depressive detective to the hard-boiled private eye and his feminist spin-off, the busybody amateur, the evil monster, the hapless victim – all of them important to the conventions of the genre and the expectations of its readers

## 5. Hellholes, havens and heterotopias

Place is very important in crime fiction and this chapter explores the reasons for this, focussing on the manors of the English 'cosies', the urban realism of the hard-boiled novels, the authority of police stations and legal firms. It also explores the way in which a crime scene becomes a place in its own right and the interplay of body and crime scene which form one of the genre's most chilling landscapes.

## 6. Crime and politics

What other genre offers such an immediate engagement with the political and social times? This chapter examines the ways in which crime fiction speaks of its times and the moral and cultural dialogues which shape it.

## 7. What's next for crime fiction?

What can we look forward to after the success of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*? Crime fiction continues to surprise us. Given the popularity of the genre during the past 200 years, this chapter predicts an increasing interest in the form.

## TOPICS/ISSUES FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

*Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* offers teachers, writers and readers additional insights into the manner in which to approach the works of their favourite crime authors, de-constructing what often appear morally simplistic texts and examining the writers' motives. It also offers students who are studying Genre Writing for the HSC a wide range of ideas and new ways in which to review and examine their set texts.

The book offers a series of questions and opinions about crime fictions continuing popularity. As the text is peppered with questions – it is an interrogation, after all – students are encouraged to read it critically, applying the questions it raises to their own readings of the set texts and voicing their ideas in classrooms and workshops.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Cathy Cole teaches Writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has also taught at the University of Western Sydney, Sydney University's Centre for Continuing Education and the University of New South Wales. She has published two crime novels (*Dry Dock*, 1999 and *Skin Deep*, 2002) featuring private eye, Nicola Sharpe. A third, non-crime novel, *The Grave at Thu Le*, which examines the lives of a French family in colonial Hanoi, will be published in May 2005. Her poetry, short fiction and non-fiction have been published in a range of journals.

Cathy became interested in crime fiction as a teenager when she read Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh but found the genre limited until she discovered a new breed of feminist crime writers in the 1980s. Since that time she has been an avid reader of a genre which she believes offers its readers the kinds of grand narratives, plot structures and characterisation missing from many contemporary texts. In particular, crime fascinates, she argues, because it isn't afraid

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to examine notions of good and evil, to address poverty and social disjunction . Some of the best writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if thrillers are grouped with what we today call the crime genre, Le Carre, Graham Greene, Daphne du Maurier, were writing far more interesting and challenging texts than writers who felt squeemish about wearing their political and moral hearts on their sleeves.

## FURTHER READING

*Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* contains a comprehensive bibliography for teachers and librarians, including books, reference texts, journals and websites.



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