

INTERROGATING THE BOUNDARIES OF PERFORMANCE AND TRANSACTION: URBAN EMBODIMENTS IN LOUISE WELSH'S *THE BULLET TRICK**

Andrea Rodríguez Álvarez
Universidad de Oviedo

ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of the female body in entertainment in the novel *The Bullet Trick* by Louise Welsh, an author of reference in contemporary Scottish fiction and the tradition of Tartan Noir. Considering the female body as central for the development of the plot, this paper analyses the strategies by which the novel contests traditional gender dichotomies as well as makes visible the agency of female corporeality in entertainment transactions. It will be argued that the body becomes an instrument for finding alternative ways of confronting violence and objectification, as well as for interrogating the apparently impermeable limits that separate performance from reality. The article also acknowledges the protagonist role that urban spaces have in contemporary crime fiction and in the articulation of the novel, thereby addressing how they can also contribute to the feminist reading of the novel.

KEYWORDS: gender, female body, urban space, women's crime fiction, Scottish literature, Louise Welsh.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la representación del cuerpo femenino en el mundo del entretenimiento a través de la novela *The Bullet Trick*, de Louise Welsh, quien se ha convertido en una de las autoras de referencia en el panorama literario escocés actual y la tradición del "Tartan Noir". Considerando el papel central de la corporalidad en el desarrollo de la novela, analizaremos las estrategias mediante las que la autora consigue visibilizar la agencialidad del cuerpo femenino en las relaciones sociales y económicas. Asimismo, estudiaremos cómo el cuerpo femenino se convierte en un instrumento para explorar formas alternativas de enfrentar la violencia y cosificación del cuerpo, así como para cuestionar los límites entre actuación y realidad. En el artículo también se explora cómo los espacios urbanos que articulan la novela y tienen un notable protagonismo en la ficción criminal contemporánea contribuyen al análisis de la misma desde una perspectiva de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: género, cuerpo, espacios urbanos, ficción criminal, literatura escocesa, Louise Welsh.



1. INTRODUCTION

Anne Cranny-Francis begins her monographic study of the body, *The Body in the Text*, by pointing out that when researching on the body she often felt like a detective, looking for the elements and concerns that would offer clues into what, by the mid-nineties, seemed a relatively recent fascination with the body (ix). The exploration of the body, as well as the study of the city, constitute the two more prominent ‘fascinations’ that have contributed considerably to the development of feminist theory since the late twentieth century. This paper focuses on the analysis of the representation of female corporeality from a gender perspective in the context of crime fiction and acknowledges how the centrality of urban spaces in the genre can also contribute to achieving a feminist reading of the novel.

According to Ian Rankin, one of the most relevant figures in contemporary Scottish crime fiction, “all readers are detectives, trying to solve the message coded in the plot, trying to work out symbols and layers of meaning” (10). In *The Bullet Trick*, readers explore the objectification of the female body in entertainment, decoding the strategies that lead to the subversion of preconceptions and dichotomies associated to gender. Thus, the novel provides an excellent platform for interrogating gender normativity, as it blurs the limits between performance and reality and reveals the implications of culturally-accepted forms of entertainment in the construction of gender relations. However, the study of the importance played by female corporeality in questioning normativity also needs to acknowledge how urban spaces can contribute to this aim, as the city has a prominent role in the articulation of *The Bullet Trick*. In addition to that, feminist research has shown many connections between bodies and cities that offer interesting insights to examine the subversive potential of their depiction in fiction. Consequently, the analysis of corporeality in *The Bullet Trick* will be mainly focused on the postulates of Elizabeth Grosz, due to her comprehensive accounts of the intersections between power, the body and the city that have been widely influential in contemporary feminist research.

The plot of *The Bullet Trick* is structured around city spaces. Chapters are entitled “Berlin”, “Glasgow” or “London,” depending on their location. These city spaces, and therefore the progression of the novel, are deeply embedded and conditioned by the revision of the cultural objectification of the female body in entertainment. In this regard, *The Bullet Trick* expands on a concept already explored in Welsh’s critically acclaimed and commercially successful first novel, *The Cutting Room* (2002),¹ in which the discovery of a mid-twentieth-century photograph of a naked woman with her throat cut leads to the revelation of Glasgow’s current

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¹ Welsh’s *The Cutting Room* received the Saltire First Book of the Year Award as well as the John Creasey Memorial Dagger, granted by the Crime Writers’ Association.



involvement in human trafficking. *The Bullet Trick* takes *The Cutting Room* to the stage, questioning the performed cutting or intentional harm to a woman as a socially-accepted form of entertainment. *The Bullet Trick* opens in London, when the protagonist, the conjuror William Wilson, is called to perform at Montgomery's retirement party in a club in Soho. However, the owner's real intention when hiring William is that he steals an envelope containing Montgomery's secret. This secret, which readers will later discover, proves the latter's involvement in the disappearance of a woman called Gloria Noon. However, Montgomery discovers the envelope's theft at the time William flees from the city. The narration follows William to his new job in a Berlin cabaret, where he meets empowered female characters like Sylvie, who will become his assistant and the protagonist of the performance of the final bullet trick. This experience will eventually be the cause of William's self-destruction in Glasgow, believing he has committed a crime. The novel alternates the William/Sylvie and Montgomery/Gloria Noon intrigues towards the climax that resolves both, exposing readers to a revision of the implications of gender through the objectification of the female body in entertainment. Thus, it could be argued that analysing the staged representation of the female body in *The Bullet Trick* also contributes to a further exploration of the feminist potential of *The Cutting Room*, a novel that, as Len Wanner asserts, broke with traditional detective fiction's ease in the portrayal of women "as silenced objects of male desire and abuse" (42).

2. ACKNOWLEDGING THE FEMALE BODY, OPENING URBAN SPACES IN CONTEMPORARY CRIME WRITING

Ian Rankin defines crime fiction as "the perfect tool for the dissection of society", as it tackles issues such as violence, abuse or exploitation (13). Over the last century, urban spaces have acquired a fundamental role in that revision of social issues. The city becomes much more than a background to the plot and plays an active part in its development and ultimate success (Erdman 274). Likewise, Denis Porter argues that the urban landscape of the crime novel is as ideologically important as its style or its protagonist may be (189). Consequently, Laura Marcus contends that understanding the social and historical circumstances of the crime novel is fundamental for the complete comprehension of the issues it raises (246). Thus, crime fiction offers an excellent ground for the analysis of female corporeality in the context of urban spaces, as well as for the exploration of the role that the literary representation of both the body and the city can play in raising gender awareness towards cultural and social preconceptions. According to Grosz, texts "do things, perform actions, create connections, bring about new alignments" (*Space* 126), thereby justifying the potential of analysing their depiction in crime fiction for the field of gender studies. In this sense, Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon argues that Louise Welsh belongs to a trend of Scottish crime authors like Denise Mina or Val McDermid that have opened a "transitional space" located "at the crossroads of gender and genre, in order to go beyond both gender and generic stereotype", thereby leading readers to question their preconceived assumptions about the rep-



resentation of the feminine (33, 37). In this regard, *The Bullet Trick* illustrates how the representation of the female body in crime fiction can become an instrument for questioning gender stereotyping in the context of the city.

One of the predominant issues in *The Bullet Trick* is the interrogation of the objectification of corporeality from a gender perspective. As Liz Bondi points out, Western tradition of thought is articulated around interrelated dualisms, such as mind and body or reason and emotion. Nevertheless, feminist critique has contended that these cannot be taken for granted as they are discursively constructed rather than given in nature and can thereby be contested (*In Whose Words* 245-46). Accordingly, Elizabeth Grosz argues that bodies have all the explanatory power that minds have and, even more so, for the study of the question of sexual difference (*Volatile*, vii). In addition, this author also states that bodies act interactively and productively, generating the new, the surprising and the unpredictable (xi). In *The Bullet Trick*, the body is vindicated as the metaphorical “mind” that guides the development of the plot of the novel, but it is also essential for generating alternative strategies and performances that interrogate dichotomies associated to gender and contribute to the acknowledgement of sexual difference.

Grosz also claims that rethinking the body has implications beyond the interests of philosophy, changing the ways in which, for instance, space, power, exchange or social and cultural production are conceived (*Space 2*). Therefore, the study of bodies from a gender perspective in crime fiction can be considered essential for rethinking and encouraging a more comprehensive analysis of social issues in the urban environment that characterises the genre. For Grosz the city is the “condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced” (“Bodies-Cities” 298). Gender and sexuality, then, lie at the core of how urban spaces are perceived, used and produced (Edensor 126) and thereby bodies and spaces can be considered to share a role as protagonists in the maintenance/defiance of patriarchal power, thus becoming a fundamental part in the development of gender studies and their questioning of the patriarchal establishment.

Bodies have been shown to be mediated by power, for instance in the form of laws, rules or standardised discourses. Similarly, urban spaces are also an essential part in the exercise of power, as theorists such as Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault or Henri Lefebvre have argued. From a feminist perspective, authors like Sarah Ahmed or Daphne Spain have demonstrated how city spaces and the discourses associated with them modify the behaviour of women, often leading to the restriction of their movement in the city which leads to a limitation of women’s access to knowledge and power and contributes to the maintenance of gender dichotomies. Consequently, authors such as Heidi J. Nast and Steven Pile encourage thinking about how bodies and places are understood, made and interrelated, as human beings live their lives “through places, through the body” (1).

However, in order to recognise the spatial potential of the representation of the female body in the *The Bullet Trick*, it is also important to bear in mind that several authors have underlined the possibility of subversion also embedded in urban spaces from a feminist point of view. In this sense, Bondi contends that “cities are places where embodied meanings and experiences of gender are not necessarily



reproduced according to dominant norms, but can be challenged, reworked and reshaped” (*Gender* 6). Similarly, Grosz points out that, although bodies are socially coded and subject to power, they can also become sites of struggle and resistance (*Space* 36). In spatial terms, this resistance can involve, as Henrietta Moore affirms, “using space in a different way or commandeering space for new uses or invading the space of others” (83). Consequently, due to the centrality of urban spaces in crime fiction, developing an analysis from the perspective of gender that acknowledges the subversive potential of the female body in the context of the city can, not only expand the scope of social analysis inherent to the genre, but also contribute to finding ways in which issues of gender can be interrogated and negotiated beyond the fictional realm.

3. THE BULLET TRICK FROM A CORPOREAL, URBAN AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The Bullet Trick highlights the leading role that female corporeality can take in interrogating gender preconceptions and raising gender awareness in the urban context of crime fiction. In this way, the novel manifests one of the strengths of Welsh’s approach to feminism, as readers are encouraged to question gender normativity autonomously, through the centrality of the body and the city in her texts, as well as through a multiplicity of discourses. The depiction of the characters in *The Bullet Trick* plays a fundamental role for this aim, becoming essential for subverting gender stereotyping and vindicating the agency of female corporeality in social and economic relations. Paul Hamilos claims that Welsh never judges her characters but allows them to behave in sometimes controversial ways, never telling the reader what to think. In this sense, Welsh’s approach can be situated within a tendency that Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones identify in their work *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*, and which they believe is extremely effective for filtering feminist ideology through crime fiction. These authors, in line with Anne Cranny-Francis’ ideas collected in *Feminist Fiction*, maintain that the inclusion of gender issues in this literary genre, together with the subversion of patriarchal principles, must be carried out by infiltrating in the system, rather than by overtly trying to overthrow it. This is so, according to these authors, because a more confrontational approach could be perceived as a political or propagandistic appropriation of fiction and could bring about a loss of readership (39, 60).

Thus, all the main characters in *The Bullet Trick* are flawed, but all of them have a specific function for the readers’ revision of the objectification of the female body in the world of entertainment. The protagonist, William Wilson, explicitly rejects the mistreatment of women (*TBT* 11, 13, 29) and appears as an empathic character who worries about the women in his life and those he encounters (41, 155). Nevertheless, he also contributes to the maintenance of gender stereotypes by entering the game and defending a clear-cut differentiation between performance and reality that the novel progressively blurs. Therefore, William’s role becomes crucial because the reader can identify with him in his/her own questioning of gender normativity,



given the character's vacillation between following gender mainstream thinking and reacting against it. The novel's portrayal of dual yet strong female characters is also essential. Sylvie, in spite of being depicted as an anti-heroine, is in control of the use of her body and constantly defies gender expectations. She plays the game but always shows agency and questions the systematic categorization of women as virgin, mother or prostitute (Jones 2000, 127), simultaneously engaging readers in her subversive performance: "What's so terrible about being called a whore?" (243). Sylvie also demonstrates her skill in saving William from Montgomery in their confrontation in William's hotel room in Berlin, where Montgomery has broken in to recover the envelope (287). Likewise, there are other secondary characters, like The Divines or Ulla, who are always shown in control of the situation, making autonomous decisions about their bodies and the spaces they occupy (20, 272, 357). Nevertheless, it is also important to point out that these female characters manifest no feeling of sisterhood, often treating each other as commodities and perpetrating stereotypical discourses, for instance when The Divines talk about the "chubby [girl] downstairs" and, while laughing, they bet that she will act as William's assistant for very little money (21). Another instance of this idea appears in the confrontation between Ulla and Sylvie, when Sylvie is found having an affair with Kolja, Ulla's boyfriend (241). However, all female characters are agents in one way or another and this agency is mainly shown by means of the body, which becomes the central component of the novel's feminism.

In *The Bullet Trick*, the female body is not portrayed as a passive object, but female characters and their bodies are portrayed as active participants. Thus, one of the best means to observe how these female characters are in control and subvert corporeal gender normativity is through analysing the active role they play in entertainment transactions. Grosz points out that patriarchal oppression relied on a body/mind dichotomy to legitimise itself, limiting women's access to social or economic roles associated with the male realm, and associating the female with "(pseudo) biological" functions (*Volatile* 14). Consequently, female bodies can be considered to have traditionally been conceived as commodities, used and exchanged by men and contributing to ensure the maintenance of the patriarchal social order (Irigaray 84). This idea can be observed in *The Bullet Trick*, for instance, when Bill, the owner of the club in Soho, introduces The Divines to the audience and hesitates before pronouncing the word "dancers", which makes the audience laugh (*TBT* 25). Bill also calls the dancers "whores" and asserts that whether they are OK or not "doesn't come into it" (41). Thus, women are perceived as merchandise, even if The Divines prove to be capable of managing themselves and their job from the very beginning of the novel (20, 37). This circumstance is further confirmed, in spatial terms, when The Divines eventually become the managers of that same urban space, the Soho club (357).

The conception of the active role of female corporeal agency that is portrayed in the novel can also be illuminated by the reversal of the penetration metaphor that JK Gibson-Graham interrogates. This author acknowledges that in order to refer to market transactions at a global scale, often the metaphor used is that of male penetration (33). Nevertheless, Gibson-Graham questions whether such male



penetration paradigm is just a one-way penetration, or if actually both participants may be mutually influential (38). This metaphor and its reversal is explicitly at work in *The Bullet Trick*, for instance, in the purchase by the American audience of the staged murder of Sylvie in Berlin which represents the idea of the female body as commodity, with the penetration of the bullet in the female body metaphorically representing the domination of patriarchy (TBT 320-21). However, in the novel's performance of the bullet trick, this transaction goes both ways: the female body enters the transaction and subverts its outcome, tricking both the audience and the magician (360-61). The reversal of this metaphor is further confirmed when William returns to London after Montgomery's case is solved and finds Sylvie at the Soho club, now managed by The Divines, performing a magic trick in which her corporeality is central (359). The importance of this moment for the reversal of the penetration metaphor is also reinforced by the fact that, throughout the novel, William had underlined the value of skill in performance and portrayed the successful conjurer as a God-like figure capable of everything on the stage: "He can saw a lady in half, stick her together, then run her through with knives... A successful conjurer can challenge gravity, defy nature, escape any restraint and sidestep death – as long as he's on stage" (160). This view on the magician is finally invalidated, ironically, by William being tricked by his own performance of the bullet trick, thinking he has actually killed Sylvie. Moreover, Sylvie makes explicit with her performance in Bill's former Soho club now managed by The Divines that she is the master of her own magic trick and her corporeality. Thus, the end of the novel evidences the actual penetration of the female body as an active agent in the patriarchal sphere that at first sight appeared to dominate it.

However, even if the *The Bullet Trick* plays a fundamental role for interrogating and subverting the principles and metaphors that have conceived the female body as passive, perhaps one of its most important contributions is that the novel searches for alternative ways of confronting violence against the body or managing the urban spaces in which the plot is developed. JK Gibson-Graham argues that in the gendered understanding of violence, women are often perceived as victims, weaker than men, and therefore the subject of fear, their bodies being vulnerable and open (24). *The Bullet Trick* subverts the principle of the female body as vulnerable and incapable of confronting male domination, not by equating male staging of violence, but by finding alternative ways of empowerment, as it can be seen in the aforementioned example of Sylvie's appropriation of magic and her redefinition of William's successful conjuror. Such an approach to gender therefore fits Elizabeth Grosz's claim that a feminist text must not only be critical towards patriarchy, but should also contribute to the generation of new, previously unconsidered, discursive spaces which may include new forms of analysis, new styles or new genres (*Space* 23). By the end of *The Bullet Trick*, it becomes evident that female characters have confronted staged and non-staged violence against their body in several ways that enhance equality in difference, as at no time do they try to imitate male behaviour. In this context, regaining space —physical space in the case of The Divines' new management of the Soho club, or metaphorical space in the case of Sylvie's appropriation of magic— becomes a crucial exponent of female



empowerment through their bodies. Likewise, it is essential to consider that such acts of self-affirmation through corporeality occur in urban spaces associated with the commodification of the female body which have been reinterpreted by the female characters of the novel in a way that validates Grosz's analysis of the city as "the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed" ("Bodies-Cities" 301).

On the other hand, the revision of the implications of the objectification of the female body in terms of violence is also undertaken by the novel's blurring of the apparently unassailable limits that separate the performed from the real. William often highlights the existence of a clear-cut difference between performance and reality (*TBT* 31, 33, 159), not questioning why culturally-accepted performance requires the presence of a beautiful woman that is made disappear or penetrated by being sawed in two or cut open (160, 337). Nevertheless, situations taking place throughout the novel show that this difference is not as obvious as it should be. For instance, some reactions of the audience to William's tricks in which he saws a woman or performs the bullet trick are "Shoot the bitch through the heart" (232), or "Shit, he's put her back together again" (32). Likewise, Uncle Dix contributes to confirming the real consequences of it when, regarding William's performance of the bullet trick with Sylvie, he asks William whether the audience wanted to see a magical trick or if they wanted to watch him cut her open, and suggests that there would be people who would pay a lot of money to see William murder her (176). Welsh has argued that violence is a way of filtering and unveiling reality and society (Hamilos) and, in *The Bullet Trick*, corporeal violence lies at the core of the questioning of the limits of the performative value of violence enacted against women on the stage. One of the clues for this interrogation is Zelda's explicit challenge to William. After Sylvie and Ulla's participation in the magic trick of cutting a woman in half and then sticking her back together, Zelda addressed him as follows:

'You chop women in two, stick them full of knives then shoot them.'
There was an edge to her words that I hadn't expected.
'It's just an act, Zelda.'
'Yes? ... So as long as you pretend that's OK?'
The conversation seemed to have snaked out of my control.
'I think so, yes'
... 'You're good, William. But you don't need women's blood to make you look talented.' (*TBT* 237)

Violence against women on the stage is repeatedly excused by William as being a part of a well-established cultural performance, but in the final enactment of the bullet trick, when William assumes he has murdered Sylvie, violence is revealed as very real. All the power of the performance evaporates, putting the focus instead on the materiality of the men who have paid for the staging of the murder of a woman as an entertainment commodity. By means of this strategy, readers are further encouraged to reconsider the treatment of the female body in the entertainment industry.



Furthermore, the mingling of the two intrigues of the novel can also be considered as one of the main instruments for the questioning of the limits between apparently inoffensive performance and reality. At the beginning of the story, the trick William performs at Montgomery's retirement party in the Soho club in London consists in sawing his female assistant in two, which, as William asserts in his retrospective narrative, used to amuse "the kind of audiences I entertained" (30). William seems to be lying in a non-critical duality at this point, just letting himself go. However, on a very representative occasion, William first takes the picture out of the envelope stolen from Montgomery and as narrator states: "This photograph had caused me a lot of grief in Berlin. In a way it was responsible for everything that had happened there, and I had no idea what it meant" (99). This can be indeed interpreted as one of the clues for a feminist reading of the novel: the body of Gloria is absent from the picture, but it has been a constant throughout William's facing of the implications of gender of his performance in Berlin. In this sense, the novel's initial crime, Montgomery's crime, is about the hidden body of a woman whose truth is revealed after a necessary step: the interrogation of the effects of performance in reality and the acknowledgement of the agency of the female body in Berlin. Thus, the final bullet trick, when the consequences of acted violence become real, marks the definite blurring of performance and reality and constitutes one of the climaxes of the novel, being narrated at the same time the murder of Gloria Noon is discovered. In this sense, even the absent female body becomes the subject in the unfolding of the plot, thus contributing to the disruption of the mind/body binary as well as others such as the subject/object embedded within it.

In such conception, it is important to mention that looking at the plot from the male protagonist's perspective also contributes to this feminist reading of the novel. Louise Welsh has argued that, since *The Bullet Trick* is a novel that explores the objectification of women in entertainment, it seemed logical following the gaze of a male protagonist. She also added that if she had been writing in the seventies she would have felt her duty to tell the story from a female perspective, but she does not feel that need now (Freeman). Moreover, in the context of Scottish detective fiction written by women, Margaret Elphinstone contends that using male subjects offers possibilities of irony that she believes crucial to good fiction (109). In *The Bullet Trick*, irony can be seen, for instance, when having the God-like figure of the magician tricked by his own bullet trick or when the clear separation between reality and performance is blurred. Nevertheless, it is also through William's urban experience that the role of the female body as an agent in the development of the plot and the mingling of performance and reality are further confirmed. William often appears as imbued or "colonized" by urban spaces which deeply influence his subjectivity. In this regard, the fact that William is faced with the blurring of performance and reality thinking he has murdered Sylvie triggers his experience of the city of Glasgow as a prison (*TBT* 134), but his commitment in the investigation of Gloria's murder (220-21) changes his relation with the city and eventually fuels his release in spatial terms (352). This also coincides with Sylvie's corporeal performance in the Soho club now managed by the Divines, where Sylvie tells William that believing he would kill her "was central to the effect... You couldn't have faked



it” (361). This situation also constitutes the final blow to William’s sound separation between performance and reality. Thus, addressing spaces from the point of view of male subjectivity not only contributes to reinforcing the centrality of the female body as the metaphorical “mind” of the novel, but also reveals one of the strengths of *The Bullet Trick* as a feminist text, since it evidences alternative ways and perspectives from which a feminist reading of crime fiction can be achieved while not renouncing to an explicit vindication of the agency of female corporeality in the urban context of the crime novel.

4. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, *The Bullet Trick* foregrounds the female body, while illuminating its objectification and questioning the implications of culturally-accepted forms of entertainment. One of the aspects that evidence this idea is the portrayal of flawed but strong female characters, whose agency mainly derives from the control of their bodies. This contributes to the novel’s vindication of female agency in transactions, as well as to the blurring of the apparently clear-cut limits between performance and reality in entertainment. This can also be seen in the interaction between the two intrigues of the novel, one performed and the other real, but both sharing many parallels that encourage readers to revise preconceived modes of understanding gender.

The analysis of embodied subjectivity in the novel also acknowledges the central role that the city plays in the revision of social issues that characterises crime fiction. For instance, female characters’ strategic use of spaces shows alternative ways of confronting violence and objectification that do not aim at equating male action. Moreover, urban spaces lie at the core of the novel’s formal structure and even the male narrator’s urban experience contributes to the feminist reading of the plot, as it further evidences the central role of female corporeality as an active participant in the development of the story. Thus, one of the most interesting elements of this novel is that its feminist reading is achieved through a variety of alternative perspectives that enable the reader to interrogate gender preconceptions.

As a result, *The Bullet Trick* can be considered as a novel with a significant potential for gender studies, as it evidences the leading role literature can play for the generation of alternative strategies and performances that interrogate dichotomies associated with the female body. In addition to that, this novel also integrates its exploration of embodied subjectivity with the centrality that urban spaces have in crime fiction. Consequently, it offers interesting insights for further research on the literary analysis of the intersections between bodies and the city from a feminist perspective, which may also contribute to developing a more comprehensible account of the social issues addressed in crime fiction.

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