

NINA L. MOLINARO



# Policing Gender and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's Crime Fiction



NEW HISPANISMS: CULTURAL & LITERARY STUDIES

POLICING GENDER AND  
ALICIA GIMÉNEZ BARTLETT'S  
CRIME FICTION

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NINA L. MOLINARO



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*A mis colegamigas, que tanto me han inspirado y animado  
desde los inicios de este proyecto hasta ahora:  
Shelley, Jackie, Renée, Inma, y Nancy*

*In memory of David Whitney Molinaro (1929–2014)*

*And for DWP—more, again, still, always*

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# Chapter 1

## Detection and Correction in the Petra Delicado Series

La novela policial tiene unas reglas que te obligan, pero al mismo tiempo te conducen.<sup>1</sup>

Alicia Giménez Bartlett

To say that crime fiction is ubiquitous these days is to acknowledge the obvious. From South Africa to Sweden, from Malaysia to Mexico, virtually all developed (and many developing) countries across the globe now claim some kind of crime fiction tradition, and together they encompass options for every kind of reader.<sup>2</sup> For consumers of formula fiction, the genre currently provides a seemingly endless supply of predictable, and therefore reassuring, novels, films, television series, and the like. For scholars, crime fiction offers complex and richly textured commentaries on popular culture, gender, sexuality, knowledge production, transgression, punishment, ideology, and other timely topics.<sup>3</sup> Among the

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<sup>1</sup> “The police procedural has rules that force us, but these rules also lead us.” Quoted in Shelley Godsland, “Alicia Giménez Bartlett: Genre Fiction and Literary Success” (13). The English-language translation from the Spanish original is mine.

<sup>2</sup> I follow the prevailing critical current from the last two decades in my choice of the term *crime fiction*, as opposed to other Anglophone monikers such as *detective fiction* and *mystery novels* or the phrases *novela negra* and *novela policiaca*, often preferred by Hispanists. As scholars have increasingly pointed out, the element of crime has always been present in the literary genre under discussion, whereas the character of the detective and the fuzzy notion of mystery (as environment or plot) have only intermittently characterized the genre and therefore more appropriately apply to subgenres. In a similar vein, *novela negra* harkens back to the historically and culturally specific terms *roman noir* and *film noir*, which appeared in France and the United States, respectively, during the 1950s. Other conventional subgenres of crime fiction include, but are not limited to, hard-boiled fiction, whodunits or puzzle novels, historical crime fiction, spy fiction, crime thrillers, and, most germane to my argument, the police procedural.

<sup>3</sup> Numerous recent monographs highlight the global nature of crime fiction. See, for example, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (2009), edited by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer; *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* (2009), edited by Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn; and *The Foreign in International Crime fiction: Transcultural Representations* (2012), edited by Jean Anderson, Carolina Miranda, and Barbara Pezzotti. The first does not include any consideration of Spain, whereas the second dedicates three of the twenty analytical chapters to crime fiction in Spain, and the third volume features an essay on Rosa Ribas’s police procedural series.

countries that have lately burst onto the crime fiction scene, Spain is arguably unusual both because of the variety of subgenres that Spanish authors have mined and because of the country's vertiginous shift from a military dictatorship to a functional democracy in the latter decades of the twentieth century. No writer embodies this turn in Spanish crime fiction better than contemporary novelist Alicia Giménez Bartlett. Beginning with *Ritos de muerte* in 1996, she has crafted a hugely successful series, centered upon the exploits of narrator-protagonist Police Inspector Petra Delicado and her partner, Deputy Inspector Fermín Garzón, which is alternately considered by critics to be revolutionary and reactionary, national and international. The time is ripe for a detailed critical study of the first crime fiction series in Spain to map the conventions of the police procedural onto the activities and perspective of a detecting policewoman.

In this book I argue that, although the nine novels published to date in the Petra Delicado series may appear to project a liberal (and liberating) agenda, in reality they prescribe antagonistic gender roles in accordance with the conservative ideology promulgated by the police procedural. As part and parcel of that ideology, the woman protagonist observes and enforces stereotypically gendered behaviors and values in others, all while emphasizing her own uniqueness and superiority. In the Petra Delicado series, correction masquerades as detection.

Significantly, as Giménez Bartlett's series progresses, the reigning police officer grows ever more effective in disciplining other women and, eventually, even young girls. The specter of self-correction is instilled early and often in the character of Petra Delicado, although its value vacillates according to the needs of the genre. Other than the protagonist, however, women throughout the series, be they colleagues, criminals, victims, or bystanders, require constant surveillance and modification, often under the guise of masculine prerogative, protectiveness, or sexual desire, lest women irrevocably disrupt the enforced stability of their societies, whereas men circulate more freely in the novels and are portrayed as intrinsic to the political, psychological, and economic prosperity of their communities. In epistemological terms, throughout the Petra Delicado series, women must be known and men, or their female representatives such as the authoritative policewoman, must know them.<sup>4</sup>

Since its inception, crime fiction has been constructed around the triumvirate of detection, criminalization, and victimization. Because Giménez Bartlett has successfully positioned her crime fiction within a literary tradition that may extend to the origins of narrative literature itself, it is useful to rehearse, in very general terms, a partial genealogy of Western crime fiction. In so doing I will highlight some of the primary ways in which the author conforms to and expands upon the literary conventions associated with the genre, particularly with regard to the relatively recent emergence of the police procedural on the crime fiction scene.

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<sup>4</sup> See my essay "To Be or Not to Be (Feminist): The Curious Epistemology of Alicia Giménez Bartlett's Petra Delicado Series" (2006) for an extensive treatment of the role of epistemology in the novels.

Fictional narratives of crime have enjoyed a long and illustrious history in the Western world, attracting authors, readers, and commentators for well over two millennia. Although academics inevitably locate the formal origins of crime fiction in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), most scholars identify a sequence of precursors that have definitively influenced the genre. These range from ancient texts such as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (c. 430 BCE), Herodotus's story of King Rhampsinitus (fifth century BCE), and the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament (500–100 BCE) through English Renaissance revenge tragedies staged during the 1500 and 1600s, of which William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) is the apotheosis.<sup>5</sup> The earliest literary chronicles of crime conformed to a tripartite pattern in which one of three components predominated: transgression, revelation, or punishment. In the aforementioned textual ancestors all three elements were invariably present, but it might be hypothesized that some narratives, such as the Book of Daniel, emphasized punishment and the restoration of social order, whereas other texts, such as *Oedipus Rex*, focused on revelation and its close relative, detection. These antecedents and all of their successors were, of course, predicated on the regular or irregular occurrence of social transgression. The *Petra Delicado* series embraces each of these components.

Because the genre adheres intimately to the rules and virtues of the societies that it strives to represent, crime narratives dating from Ancient Greece through nineteenth-century Europe predictably stressed prescriptive behavior and lobbied against societal corruption in its myriad expressions. Lawbreakers were habitually identified as outsiders and expelled from their communities, either through death or through exile, and the source of the corruption was thus expunged. Giménez Bartlett emphasizes the vision of criminals as both outcasts and strangers vis-à-vis the normative Spanish society touted by, and embodied in, the narrating detective. Moreover, the *Petra Delicado* series echoes Spain's much analyzed historical conflict with foreigners.

Mystical and intuitive methods of inquiry also emerged promptly in most stories of crime, from the first manifestations of the genre well into the eighteenth century. From Tiresias in Sophocles's play to the ghost who wanders through *Hamlet*, "detectives" were routinely aided by unnatural access to other worlds. With the advent of the Enlightenment in seventeenth-century Europe, however,

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<sup>5</sup> In my brief review of the origins of crime fiction, I have been guided by John Scaggs's excellent introduction to the genre. He references Dorothy L. Sayers who, as early as 1928, lobbied for four pre-Enlightenment antecedents of modern crime fiction: two stories from the Book of Daniel, one story by Herodotus, and one story taken from the Hercules myths (7–8). I do not consider the last antecedent in my summary. For other recent histories of crime fiction, all of which emphasize English-language authors, see Stephen Knight's *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2010) and *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (2010), edited by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. Martin Priestman's edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003) covers approximately the same terrain in fourteen individually authored chapters arranged around themes such as French crime fiction and the thriller.

tales of transgression progressively focused on detection based in reason, whereby the intelligent, rational, and thereby socially superior (male) citizen was charged with recognizing, maintaining, and, if the need arose, reestablishing the desirable social order. It is but a short step to postulate the interdependence of detection and social correction that was to characterize most, if not all, subsequent crime fiction. And in police procedurals such as the Petra Delicado novels, this interdependence provides the foundation upon which all other elements inevitably rest.

If the Enlightenment ushered in an irrevocable change in the essence of detection from supernatural intervention to logical deduction, it also witnessed a significant shift in the nature of justice, and in the nexus between justice and punishment. Given the widespread challenges to political and religious sovereignty in Europe during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it is not surprising that many narratives of crime subsequently redirected the collective investment in order toward the personalized notion of revenge. In the face of apparent institutional malfeasance, fictional human agents during this period in literary history regularly resorted to criminal activities in order to avenge the most significant affronts to public morality. The vengeance plot in assorted guises has continued to infuse successive iterations of the genre, and it affords a standard motivation in contemporary crime fiction. Individualized retribution is particularly relevant to the police procedural because, as is the case with Giménez Bartlett's crime fiction, it is often interwoven into oppositional notions of gender, among other markers of difference.

As the seventeenth century marched inexorably toward the consolidation of Enlightenment rationality, rebellious literary and real-life heroes lost social visibility and writers re-dedicated their tales of crime to communal retribution, often by highlighting the spectacle of punishment. Remarking on this consolidation, Joan Ramon Resina, among others, directly aligns the emergence of the eighteenth-century detective with "la concepción heurística del saber y el autovalimiento intelectual como transparencia de la mente a sí misma" [the heuristic conception of knowledge and intellectual self-protection, understood as the transparency of the mind to itself]<sup>6</sup> (21). In crime fiction, then, the detective constituted the principal mental motor within any criminal investigation, and as such was tasked with proving culpability and assigning appropriate penalties. This investment in a specific version of human agency has only intensified over time and is very much in evidence throughout the Petra Delicado series.

In eighteenth-century Europe, the simmering ideological tensions between sociality and personal freedom, always a constant in crime fiction, were on display as cautionary tales that concluded with the mandatory public execution of the wrongdoer. One version of this tension flowed through the "real-life" accounts of famous criminals, such as those featured in the eighteen volumes of François Gayot de Pivatal's *Causes célèbres et intéressantes* (1734–1741) and in the *Newgate*

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all English-language translations of Spanish-language quotations are mine.

*Calendar* stories, first published in London in 1773. Another version of the same tension was displayed in communal class fantasies like William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), in which luck and coincidence replaced cosmic intercession in order to shore up the mandate for institutional control.<sup>7</sup> And luck and coincidence are at the heart of all detecting activities in Giménez Bartlett's crime fiction.

In contrast to the cautionary approach prescribed by the literary description of actual crimes, the nineteenth-century Gothic novel framed the same philosophical anxieties about social responsibility and individual liberty as a conflict between pre-Enlightenment memory and post-Enlightenment fear. In other words, as Fred Botting observes, "Illegitimate power and violence [are] not only put on display but [threaten] to consume the world of civilised and domestic values" (4–5). The phantoms and doubles in Gothic crime fiction such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) gestured toward the horror of societal collapse, which was itself reassuringly mediated by a narrative drive toward intelligibility.<sup>8</sup> Paralleling this drive, the Gothic detectives in these two novels attempted to remedy their immanent powerlessness by comprehending, and thus assigning meaning to, the unknown.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The widespread fascination with criminality manifested in Spain during the second half of the nineteenth century through a surge in bandit narratives, true crime stories, and forensic chronicles such as Hilario González's *Causas y delitos célebres y contemporáneos* (1860) and Vicente Caravantes's *Anales dramáticos del crimen o causas célebres españolas y extranjeras* (1861). Although these narrative descriptions may have lacked the agent of justice so vital to all crime fiction, they helped to inject into the Spanish literary tradition a preference for mimesis that will typify the genre throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. By the same token, Salvador Vázquez de Parga usefully distinguishes novels of crime, which were popular in Spain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from crime novels. See pages 20–32 in his *La novela policiaca en España* (1993) for a useful assessment of these and other salient contributions to the crime fiction tradition in Spain before 1900.

<sup>8</sup> Maurizio Ascari, author of *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (2007), discusses canonical and non-canonical examples of crime fiction by mapping "those hybrid zones where its conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of pseudo-sciences" (xii).

<sup>9</sup> In the Spanish context, Romantic writers like Ángel Saavedra, more popularly known as the Duke of Rivas, and José Zorrilla framed the same divergence in terms of supernatural disruptions that exposed the criminals in "Una antigüalla de Sevilla" (1838) and "El testigo de bronce" (1845), respectively. Curiously, in each narrative poem the investigator is an aristocrat and justice emanates from a deity, in accordance with the traditionalist bent of Spanish Romanticism. However, in Saavedra's version, the king-cum-detective is also the offender, as well as a precursor of Stevenson's schizophrenic Jekyll/Hyde, whereas Zorrilla's poem plays on and with the infectious fear of guilt. Both texts critique the reigning institutions of political and moral authority, and they endorse the function of these institutions in quelling the impending social disorder implied by unsolved,



Pedro Antonio Alarcón's short novel "El clavo" (1853), sometimes cited as the first instance of crime fiction in Spain, also dramatizes the importance of fate and chance in the disclosure of offender and offense, and it also centers on the exploits of a wrongdoer with multiple selves, each with a corresponding history. In a literal sense, the past, personified in a female lawbreaker, returns and repeats itself in and through the narrative. The three unsuspecting male victims must figuratively coincide at the same time and place in order to set in motion the chain of events that lead toward castigation and resolution. In marked contrast to his Romantic antecedents, however, the detective in "El clavo" recognizes his own complicity and explains the crime without divine (or royal) intervention. Justice triumphs over passion and the normative social codes are restored, as predicted and expected (Resina 25). "El clavo" anticipates three evolving concerns in the Petra Delicado novels: the detective's complicity, multiple selves, and the return of past crimes. These concerns manifest in different ways in each of the installments, but when taken together, they characterize the series as a whole.

The three issues also gesture toward determinism. A nuanced relationship of cause and effect was to continue to infuse crime fiction in Europe and elsewhere. Paul Skenazy helpfully characterizes the structural contradiction inherent in both Gothic romance and crime fiction as a double rhythm "moving inexorably forward in time while creeping slowly backward to resolve the disruptions and violence evident in the present" (quoted in Scaggs 16). As these nineteenth-century examples indicate, the memorial past disturbs, with irregular intensity, all crime fiction insofar as it implicates instability, irrationality, and immorality; these are gradually countered by the so-called modernizing forces of reason, which likewise appear to underwrite permanence, moderation, and goodness. In related fashion the dominant social order, as it is progressively incarnated in the victorious and smart detective, or detectives, inevitably prevails over crime because the conventions of the genre authorize ideological consolidation, as opposed to dispersal, resistance, or rejection.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, crime fiction has, from its inception, evinced a more or less conservative ideology and, as such, has aligned detection with social correction.

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and thus uncontrollable, crimes. See Ricardo Landeira's *El género policiaco en la literatura española del siglo XIX* (2001) for an extended analysis of the nineteenth-century Spanish texts, to which I refer only briefly. In his suggestive discussion of the ways in which these texts contribute to (and perhaps even create) the developing crime fiction tradition in Spain, Landeira also incorporates other literary precursors that I do not review in my abbreviated introduction to the genre.

<sup>10</sup> Emilia Pardo Bazán's often-studied novella "La gota de sangre" (1911) offers a case in point: in addition to possessing an aesthetic sensibility, free time, and the financial means to enjoy both, Señor Selva, the narrator-protagonist, is intelligent and egotistical. The self-appointed detective's discovery of the misbehaving femme fatale depends equally on his unabashed self-confidence, his ability to recognize the distinctive smell of gardenia, and his redemptive potency. The romance plot is endorsed but not at the expense of the hero's deductive capabilities. I will make a related argument regarding romance in Chapter 8.

As Stephen Knight posited some thirty years ago, the genre intrinsically supports the chimera of societal constancy insofar as it “create[s] an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime” (*Form* 2). Readers look to the genre for assurance and confirmation regarding the institutions charged with supervising public welfare, and they consume crime fiction in order to collaborate in and extend, albeit illusorily, the fiction of social control. As Resina comments, “[L]a novela policiaca despliega, junto a la ideología del grupo social que domina el espacio público, una función represiva que, a través de la conexión burguesa entre la ley y la opinión pública, deriva en última instancia del Estado” [[I]n line with the ideology of the social group that dominates a given public space, the crime novel deploys a repressive function that ultimately derives from the State, by means of the bourgeois connection between law and public opinion] (38). Fictional narratives of crime promote this “repressive function” in at least three ways: they confirm crime as a spectacle of social disobedience that demands punishment, hence the punitive dimension of all crime fiction; they mark criminals as undesirable aliens, thus exemplifying acceptable and unacceptable conduct; and they develop mechanisms by which individuals and groups can, and therefore do, implement the prevailing rules of a given culture. At this juncture we are very close to a formula for the *Petra Delicado* series.

One especially potent personification of the third element in this vision is the policeman (and, only recently, the policewoman). Although deviation and detection have always been constants of the genre, renowned author Dorothy L. Sayers maintains that crime fiction did not fully develop until an effective and ever more observable police force was created in Europe and elsewhere at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Not coincidentally, the professionalization of the modern police bolstered the pervasive adherence to Enlightenment-era science and rationality, which depended on the twin beliefs that the employment of reason would produce truth and that the quest for truth was fundamental to human improvement (Skaggs 18). Early police work accentuated the methodical collection of physical evidence by a variety of means (oral interviews, photography, fingerprints, and forensics among them) and the intellectual capacities of a squad of trained investigators whose primary task consisted of discovering and combating crime in general, as well as the criminals associated with specific crimes. Thus, rationality effectively partnered with social institutions.

Police work also proved especially relevant to the reinforcement of economically viable national identities during the nineteenth century because, as Ernest Mandel has postulated in the context of crime fiction, the Industrial Revolution spawned the rise of capitalism, which in its turn generated massive unemployment. During this period, crime and the professional criminal class expanded both spectacularly and rapidly (5).<sup>11</sup> The accompanying anxiety of the

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<sup>11</sup> Mandel’s claim regarding capitalist ideology has been echoed and expanded by contemporary theoreticians of the crime novel such as Joan Ramon Resina and Dennis Porter, among many others.

burgeoning middle class permeated nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, and it was initially translated into hostility toward governmental agents that included the police. In response to the pervasive cultural antipathy toward political authority, confirmed by the interlocking Romantic ideals of individualism and the supremacy of the artist, nineteenth-century crime fiction writers repeatedly rendered policemen as unimaginative dupes, intellectual inferiors, and ineffectual mouthpieces for excessive and often fraudulent governmental power.<sup>12</sup>

In that spirit, in 1841 Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" launched the literary standard that would influence most crime fiction for the next century. In Poe's seminal detective story, the analytically gifted Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin is juxtaposed with the mentally mediocre French police, a pairing that supports the preeminence of singular intellect and the perceived limitations of groups and institutions. John T. Irwin has convincingly claimed that Poe's "analytic detective story pursues [the task of differentiating human beings] through a series of interconnected master/slave oppositions between mind and body, man and animal, domestic and foreign, and, of course, divine and diabolic" (67). In Irwin's schema, the police in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and in numerous other nineteenth-century crime narratives would clearly fall on the "slave" side of these dyads. Poe's portrayal of the police in this and other self-proclaimed tales of ratiocination suggested the ambivalent, if not dismissive, attitude that still suffuses much of the contemporary crime fiction involving privatized detection, an attitude that is often mediated through the successful professional partnership between a self-employed detective and a police officer.

In consonance with the evolution of a visible police presence in the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, the first victorious policemen in crime literature were, not coincidentally, reformed criminals whose prior experience and knowledge paradoxically transformed them into exemplars of moral exactitude. As one initial example, literary historians cite Eugène François Vidocq (1775–1857), who published his four-volume *Mémoires* in 1828. A convicted bandit, Vidocq later became the first chief of the detective section of the Parisian police and founded the original modern detective agency in 1817, some thirty years before the appearance of the Pinkerton detective agency in the United States. Salvador Vázquez de Parga names as the potential Spanish heirs of Vidocq's memoirs Daniel Freixá y Martí's *El mundo del crimen: Reseña típico-histórica de la criminalidad moderna* (1888) and *La policía moderna: Secretos de la criminalidad contemporánea* (1893), and he further declares that "estas obras revelan las técnicas policiales y la sociología del mundo del delito" [these works

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Hart rightly noted in 1987 that Pardo Bazán's "La gota de sangre" exemplifies this trend by portraying policemen as vulgar and dishonest, and she further observed that police corruption constituted "probably the single most important [vital theme] in all of Spanish detective fiction" (24). Her groundbreaking introduction to Spanish crime fiction, arguably the first to be published in English, appeared some nine years before *Ritos de muerte*, the first installment of the Petra Delicado series.