

# Why Women Read Detective Stories

by Carolyn Wells, 1862-1942

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When I was asked the question, "Why do women read detective stories?" the logical retort seemed to be, "Why not?"

Then I realized that was not the answer expected of me, and I set to work to find a better one.

The traditional critic of woman's uncertain, coy and hard to please volitions, would put it down to her craving for excitement, to her desire to bask in an artificial atmosphere that would be a distinct relief from the drudgery and drabness of her own daily life.

This, the Nineteenth Century writers informed us, was the reason for the vogue of stories of high life, of lords and ladies, and balls of dazzling light.

But present day conditions are different. Modern frankness and worldly wisdom leave little room for glamor, and relief from domestic drabness is found less vicariously than on the printed page.

Nor is reading today a weapon for killing time. More powerful and effective weapons are at hand in the radio, the telephone or the motor car.

A possible reason for woman's lately developed interest in detective stories may be discerned in her desire to emulate all masculine pursuits. She wanted to vote, wanted to cut her hair short, wanted to smoke, wanted to ride astride, wanted pajamas, and wanted the same untrammelled frankness of speech that

man had hitherto monopolized. These things she achieved, and it may be that detective stories fell into line.

For woman's interest in the matter is of comparatively recent growth. The lists of detective story fans, continually appearing in newspapers, includes Presidents, Prime Ministers, Kings, Statesmen, scientific giants and celebrated men of all types, but never does a woman's name appear on those lists. We are not informed that Mrs. Hoover or Queen Mary eagerly buy thrillers at the station news stands or order them from the booksellers by half dozens.

Yet recent statistics compiled by the editor of this magazine, tend to show that the interest in detective fiction is about equally divided between the sexes.

This is not hard to believe when one remembers how many of our best American writers of detective stories are women.

From the pioneer, Anna Katharine Green, on down to the most popular authors of today, there are more well-known feminine names than masculine.

That is, in America. In England, the reverse is true, and there are many more celebrated masculine pens over there writing detective fiction than feminine.

As to why women read these stories of crime and detection, various elements must enter into consideration.

Doubtless the aftermath of war is to a certain extent responsible. Four years of reading thrilling news of bloodshed, heroism and horrors made ordinary stories seem humdrum and brought about a flood of books that were full of excitement.

When the better class of writers took up these subjects and combined the horrors of murder with an intellectual interest of problem solving, the keen logical instinct usually present, even if partially dormant in the feminine mind, awoke, and women began to see that detective stories had a lure of their own, as compelling as crossword puzzles or village gossip.

The feminine mind is often quicker and more direct than a man's mind. A woman will "cut 'cross lots" and reach instantly a conclusion that it takes a man an appreciable time to arrive at.

Too, she has, nine times out of ten, a lively curiosity that holds her interest in an absorbing story, just to see "how it will turn out."

She loves suspense, and, as a rule, she wants to see virtue rewarded and vice punished. Her loves and hates are strong, her sympathies are staunch and loyal, and as detective stories usually turn out the way she wants them to, she is sure of a "happy ending."

So, women are coming to realize more and more that detective stories appeal to the feminine mind that is willing to exercise its own peculiar gifts of logic and deduction.

Though this is seldom an acquired taste.

If a woman really dislikes detective stories, in their essence, she will always dislike them. Not often can she be brought to change her mind.

Another reason for feminine interest is the scope for the working of their emotions.

A woman may read a dozen new novels without much catching of her breath or tightening of her heartstrings.

But in a well-written detective story she finds someone to pity, someone to hate, someone to become enraged at, someone to love, and all with startling and inescapable reasons. She tingles with fear, she sighs with relief, she revels in the dangers and dilemmas, and her quick wits try to outrun the detective in his deductions and often do.

She is up against a new phase of life and it intrigues her. As for the old love stories, she knew all seven of their plots and they held no surprises for her experienced interest.

But detective stories proved a new field, and women have fallen for it.

As proof of this, note the introduction of the mystery story into the women's magazines. Scarcely a number but has a short story or a serial instalment of a murder tale.

Run over the magazines in your doctor's or dentist's office. The detective story pages will be worn to tatters when the informative articles still show bright, clean pages.

So far, we have considered only detective fiction.

But in fact-stories, or in current news items the principle is the same.

I have heard men and women discuss celebrated murder trials as they were taking place, and always, for logical reasoning and clear understanding, the feminine mentality was abreast of the man's mind.

Intellect is impartially distributed between the sexes, and it in all ages man has achieved more lasting fame, raised to himself more enduring monuments, it is not because of a superior brain, but because of a multitude of other reasons and causes which may not be here enumerated, however.

Similarly, though women may have insight, even intuition, they are not so well fitted as men are to be detectives, which calling demands far more than mental powers.

However, she has a right to read detective stories, a franchise she is exercising more and more freely every day. There is every reason why she should read them and no reason why she should not.

