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Bloody Women: How Female Authors Have Transformed the Scottish Contemporary Crime Fiction Genre

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Abstract

This study will explore the role of female authors in contemporary Scottish crime fiction. Over the past thirty years, women writers have overhauled the traditionally male dominated genre of crime fiction by writing about strong female characters who drive the plot and solve the crimes. Authors including Val McDermid, Denise Mina and Lin Anderson are just a few of the women who have challenged the expectation of gender and genre. By setting their novels in contemporary society they reflect a range of social and political issues through the lens of a female protagonist. By closely examining the female characters, both journalists, in Val McDermid's Lindsay Gordon series and Denise Mina's Paddy Meehan series, I wish to explore the issue of gender through these writers' perspectives.

This essay documents the influence of these writers on my own practice-based research which involves writing a crime novel set in a post referendum Scotland. I examine a progressive and contemporary Scottish society, where women hold many senior positions in public life, and investigate whether this has an effect on the outcome of crimes. Through this narrative, my main character will focus on the current and largely hidden crimes of human trafficking and domestic abuse. By doing this I examine the ways in which the modern crime novel has evolved to cross genre boundaries. In addition to focusing on a crime, the victims and witnesses, today's crime novels are tackling social issues to reflect society's changing attitudes and values.

Keywords: women, crime fiction, female protagonists, Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Lin Anderson, Scottish, domestic abuse, human trafficking, gender

The rise of the female protagonist in crime fiction in recent years has

dismantled what has historically been a male dominated world. This shift has impacted on both authors and protagonists. Until the 1990s, crime fiction in Scotland was largely dominated by male writers including William McIlvanney and Ian Rankin, and in crime fiction as a genre, male characters were often portrayed as the experts and female characters as victims. Since then the surge in female crime fiction writers has overhauled the genre, bringing a fresh perspective to the crime fiction market. This study will explore the role of female authors in contemporary Scottish crime fiction and how they have overhauled this traditionally male dominated genre of crime fiction by writing about strong female characters who drive the plot and solve the crimes. Authors including Val McDermid, Denise Mina and Lin Anderson are just a few of the women who have challenged the expectation of gender and genre and patriarchal order to create memorial female protagonists in traditionally masculine roles. This in turn has transformed the way in which readers view the role of women in crime fiction. In what has now become a distinct and popular genre these characters have challenged the familiar realism of the traditionally hostile worlds of journalism, the law and the police where bullying and misogyny once was the norm. By setting their novels in contemporary society they reflect a range of social and political issues through the lens of a female protagonist. By closely examining the female characters, both journalists, in Val McDermid's Lindsay Gordon series and Denise Mina's Paddy Meehan series, I wish to explore the issue of gender through these writers' perspectives. The common thread in these books is that the main female characters move between differing classes of society with access to the establishment as well as high-rise estates in the poorest corners of cities. With this background of realism, the plots explore the world of crime whilst also exposing cracks in the fabric of society. All the protagonists have their own flaws of guilt, failure and grief. Val McDermid, Lin Anderson, Aline Templeton, Denise Mina, Louise Welsh, Karen Campbell, Gillian Galbraith, Alex Gray and Anna Smith are just some of the authors to have brought a fresh perspective to the genre. Some have gone beyond writing only about female detectives as their key protagonists and have diversified. There is a strong connection between many of the novels I have analysed which feature

female characters with an increasing diversification in terms of profession and genre. Author Lin Anderson writes about a female forensic scientist in her Rhona MacLeod series, Denise Mina has written separate series about a journalist, Paddy Meehan, a former psychiatric patient, Maureen O'Donnell, and a police detective, Alex Morrow. Val McDermid's protagonists include Lindsay Gordon, a journalist, Kate Brannigan, a private investigator, and police detective Carol Jordan. This article will focus on female writers using female journalists as their central characters. It will also explore the influence these writers have had on my own creative writing project, a novel with the working title *The Invisible Chains*, which centres on a Scottish journalist whose investigations into a murder lead her to uncover an international human trafficking ring. When the body of a young woman is pulled from the River Clyde, police struggle to identify her. When journalist Megan Ross receives an anonymous tip-off about another girl's body she realises that the two murders are linked. The chapters of the book, told from Megan's point of view, are interspersed with italicized entries which tell the story of a young trafficked victim, known as "The Girl," from Nigeria. The third strand of the story, which feeds into the structure and plot of the novel, are blog entries from Trudy, a victim of domestic abuse. This article will later detail the approach I took to developing these characters and what informed and influenced these decisions.

The starting point in terms of influential Scottish female crime authors would be with Val McDermid, who was one of the first writers to challenge the male dominated genre with her first book *Report for Murder* (1987), a feminist mystery novel featuring lesbian journalist, turned detective Lindsay Gordon. She has acknowledged her timing with the book was significant as the first wave of American women's crime fiction, authors including Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton and Marcia Muller had just arrived in the UK. McDermid's book was published by independent publisher, Women's Press, and, as stated in an article with *The Independent* newspaper (September 11, 2010) McDermid said she was in "the right place at the right time with the right book." In the same article she described how the books went largely "unreviewed by the mainstream press and was ignored by chain booksellers." This was largely down to

McDermid challenging the traditional boundaries of UK crime fiction, traditionally strictly heterosexual, by introducing the first openly lesbian female detective. McDermid cleverly uses Lindsay to challenge the perception that investigating and reporting on crimes can only be done properly by a man. In *Report for Murder*, Lindsay is criticised for acting coldly when reporting on a killing that has taken place. She says, “I’m going to get well pissed in my local. Put all this out of my mind” (McDermid 77). However when challenged on her attitude she says, “It’s the job I do. I’ve been trained to forget my feelings and do the business. And I do it very well” (77). McDermid has also spoken of the influence US novelist, Sara Paretsky had on her writing process. McDermid was particularly influenced by Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only* which features a female private eye. Speaking at the Edinburgh Book Festival, in 2016, she said the book struck a chord with her because of its urban setting. Crimes happened in the novel because of the environment and its social structures. What was most refreshing she added, was the fact there was a female protagonist “with a brain who didn’t need to call the guys in every time something difficult happened.” Having closely read the Lindsay Gordon series, I reflected on whether Lindsay had to adopt a male attitude to do her job effectively, given the masculine working environment she operated in. In *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction, Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2011), Gill Plain argues that regardless of a detective’s gender or sexuality, they will always exist “in negotiation with a series of long-established masculine codes” (Plain 11). She goes on to write that the extent to which a detective will conform or challenge such codes is pivotal to an “understanding of crime fiction and the changing role of the investigator within the genre” (11). These genre conventions impact on the way in which writers develop their female protagonists, yet McDermid created a confident female character who would not hesitate to speak her mind. In *Report for Murder* the news editor of the *Clarion* newspaper throws a memo at her and tells her that the story, about a woman who has had thirteen miscarriages, requires a woman’s touch, Lindsay Gordon replies that she’s not there to do “this sort of crappy feature” (McDermid, 96). She goes on to add that what the story requires is a “dollop of heavy handed sentimentality and you bloody well know that’s not my line” (96).

Lindsay refers to the feature as “sexist garbage” then goes on to tell him to assign it to a male reporter. Such assertiveness and outspokenness could be associated with masculine behaviour, and have traditionally been the qualities in male protagonists in the genre. By projecting this persona of someone who is emotionally detached from the issue, it could be argued that Lindsay is behaving like a man, and actually appears to be a replica of the male predecessors in the genre, rather than a revisionary character. In fact McDermid was shrewd and I would argue bold, with her development of the character of Lindsay. She is not at all self-conscious in her role as a journalist in what was very much a man’s profession in the 1980s and McDermid succeeds in establishing her as an entirely viable entity. In an interview with Danuta Kean, in *The Daily Mail* (July 19, 2012), McDermid spoke of the social expectations of women and of the crime fiction genre, which means “anybody who writes a categorically female protagonist is by definition transgressive.” By writing about strong women who drive the plot and solve the crime, these female characters are challenging the patriarchal order and traditional expectations that crimes are solved by men. In addition, the female characters are becoming the subjects of the novel rather than the objects, as victims of crimes.

At this stage it is worth considering Judith Butler’s ideas about the cultural constructedness of gender as well as its “performativity.” By this I mean examining whether gender is performative and whether to walk and talk in a certain way consolidates the impression of being a man or woman. In *Gender Trouble* (2007), third-wave feminist critic Butler argues that feminism has made a mistake by trying to assert that ‘women’ were a group with common characteristics and interests. She observes that, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 34). Gender is therefore a performance relating to what you do at certain times rather than who you are. Butler argues that the sex of individuals is also a socially constructed category which stems out of social and cultural practices. I would advocate that in contemporary crime fiction, gender is not an innate quality linked to sex, although women are often objectified for sex and victims in crimes of a sexual nature, but rather a series of “fabrications manufactured and

sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (185). By this I mean the way in which the female protagonists, who are driving the plot to solve the crime, behave and act through their use of words and gestures. This is particularly relevant to this study because of the focus on texts featuring women working in a traditionally male dominant work environment. Assertive behaviour from a woman, which would possibly be acceptable from a man, is seen as being “pushy” or “bossy” behaviour. So these gender constructions dictate what is considered appropriate behaviour from a woman. By applying the performative theories of Butler to several characters, as mentioned, in the crime fiction genre I have been able to examine whether the hegemonic norms can be tested.

McDermid’s characterisation of Lindsay led me to further explore the role of other female protagonists in the newsroom environment further. Denise Mina’s series about young reporter, Paddy Meehan, who also works in a Glasgow newspaper in the 1980s, is a useful example of how women crime writers have utilized female characters in a Scottish setting. In *The Field of Blood* (2005), Mina introduces eighteen-year-old Paddy Meehan who has just started her career in journalism. Paddy is quite ordinary as a protagonist in that she is self-conscious, lacking confidence, critical of herself yet despite this she is ambitious to do well at work. In his book, *Tartan Noir* (2014), Len Wanner describes her as “self-conscious in her girlishness, self-satisfied in her feminism” (45). He describes these as “typical traits of adolescence” in the young woman who has only just begun her career in journalism. However I would challenge these observations. Paddy may have been “self-conscious in her girlishness”; yet her anxiety and self-consciousness would have been heightened while working in such a male-dominated and sexist workplace. Bearing in mind that this was during the 1980s, before equality legislation was taken seriously in a newspaper environment, it is remarkable that Paddy had the inner confidence and strength to throw herself into such a hostile environment. So in doing this Mina has created a significant role model in Paddy. She uses her to show that even a seemingly ordinary character, with insecurities and worries common to girls of that age, can find inner strength and resolve to channel ambition and drive herself forward. Paddy’s challenges are similar to those of McDermid’s character

Lindsay Gordon, a journalist, working in Glasgow in the same era. The notion of a female protagonist working in a male dominated profession assumes certain gender behavioural expectations, that women are there to serve the men and not hold senior roles. This is the issue for Paddy Meehan in *The Field of Blood*, when she is sent to the bar to get a drink for a male colleague. Although she doesn't like her male colleagues or even want to be in their company, she knows she has to show willing if she is to earn a promotion. She said she would have felt like an "interloper at the bar" if she "hadn't been on News business, here to get the picture editor's tankard filled" (Mina, *Field* 7).

However the distinction apparent between both characters is that Lindsay is assertive, professional and self-assured. She does not appear to assume any behavioural expectations tied to her gender. It may be relevant to note that Lindsay is a lesbian, confident with her own sexuality and not afraid of establish herself in a man's world, again pushing the boundaries of what until then had been a strictly heterosexual genre. However Mina's Paddy is lacking in emotional maturity and has a constant conflict with conformity throughout the book. Although towards the end of Mina's *The Field of Blood* the reader realises the personal development which Paddy has undergone when she breaks off her engagement with her boyfriend. This is a bold move on her part as she still lives at home with her staunchly Catholic family who has certain expectations of her and the way in which she should lead her life: "I want a career and I don't think I can get married and have one, so I'm choosing the career" (335). This is met with outrage by her boyfriend who accuses her of turning into a lesbian. He says, "Why do you need to try and be a man? What's wrong with just being a woman?" (Mina, *Field* 335). This is significant as it infers that Paddy should be meeting his expectations, and indeed society and her family's, of how a woman should be behaving. The constructions of gender become relevant here as behaviour which would be deemed acceptable by a man is viewed as being inappropriate by a woman. Paddy is being punished because she is deviating from old gender norms and traditional concepts of what it means to be a woman as explored in Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998). This theme is one I will explore later in this article when I focus on its relevance to my own narrative.

However this conflict between professionalism and expectations regarding gender behaviour is a common theme throughout the narrative for both Paddy Meehan and Lindsay Gordon. Another example of gender behaviour, and how a character can challenge expectations, can be seen Anna Smith's debut, *The Dead Won't Sleep* (2011) in which we are introduced to the character of Rosie Gilmour. She is working in journalism in a Glasgow newspaper and Smith manages to emulate some of the qualities of McDermid's Lindsay Gordon, in the character of Rosie, by using sharp humour and wittiness to deflect sexist comments. During a night out with work colleagues a male colleague boasts about his sexual prowess thanks to some tablets he has been given by a friend. He describes his performance as 'unbelievable' claiming he's having sex several times a day. Rosie goes on to interject, "Just think how knackered you'd be if there was somebody with you" (Smith 239). Although *The Dead Won't Sleep* is set in 1997, ten years after McDermott's *Report for Murder* and Mina's *The Field of Blood*, both Lindsay Gordon, Paddy Meehan and Rosie Gilmour face similar challenges in the newsroom from male colleagues. Rosie, like Lindsay, does not trust her news editor and so purposely withholds information from him. In his first week in his new job he sent Rosie to follow a trivial story that she felt a junior reporter could easily have covered. She followed instructions but when she returned to the office she takes the news editor aside and "told him in no uncertain terms never to pull a stunt like that again" (75). Rosie was adamant that she would not be pushed around by a male colleague. However when interviewed, on September 18, 2015, Smith said gender wasn't an issue for her when she was creating the character of Rosie who is "just a woman and a journalist." She said that that if a story is good enough then it "shouldn't matter whether the main protagonist is a woman." The characterisation of the protagonist should engage with readers and a good character is a good character regardless of their gender. She added that, "I would never want to see women characters being recognised just because they are women." Nonetheless the huge shift in the crime fiction genre in recent years means that this is unavoidable. Smith may not consciously have been keen to contribute to the debate surrounding female protagonists. However by writing a

successful series featuring a strong woman character comparisons and distinctions are certain to be made.

Although McDermid, Mina and Smith all feature female journalists as their protagonists in these novels, I must also acknowledge the significant influence of Lin Anderson's books. Her first book, *Driftnet* (2003) introduced forensic scientist Dr Rhona MacLeod who is now the established character of her series. The personality traits evident in Rhona are similar to those which are exhibited by the female protagonists I have examined. Explaining her choice of profession for the character of Rhona, in an interview on September 11, 2016, Anderson said there are more male criminals than female and more male police officers than female. She further acknowledged that the area of forensic science is now a popular career for women, so there is no shortage of female experts in the forefront of all branches of forensics. Anderson described Rhona as "self sufficient, good at her job and expects to be treated as an equal." She further argued that having a strong female lead character does not mean her femininity is compromised: "It's really interesting when you talk to people in this field and realise that when they are examining the victim of a crime they may write up their notes in the tent with the body." Therefore the protagonist is acknowledging that this is "not just a body but a human being." So what is significant here is that Anderson has acknowledged that the female protagonist brings additional strengths and values to the crime scene. This fresh perspective allows the reader to engage, on a human level, with the protagonist who is seeing the person who has died as a human being, an individual rather than just a dead body.

These memorable female characters, created by Anderson, McDermid and Mina, have really reshaped the crime fiction genre. These women, who all have their own stories, are integrated in society. None of them are particularly remarkable, which perhaps makes them resonate with readers, yet they all possess an inner determination and strength. *The Invisible Chains*, the practice based component of my own research, is set in 2016 and focuses on a female protagonist who is editing a current affairs magazine. Her character was developed with the central theme of women working in a more progressive society; post the independence referendum, where more women hold senior positions. When I developed

Megan I wanted her to challenge the hegemonic norm which she still faces in her roles in the workplace and as a mother. I wanted the character to emulate some of the characteristics of the protagonists created by McDermid, Mina, Smith and Anderson. Megan is ambitious, intelligent and has a successful career which she has combine with motherhood, albeit she does not believe she copes with both roles. She keeps her work and personal lives separate and adopts a 'masculine' persona while in a work environment. Despite advances in the workplace and the role of women in Scottish society, she still faces the challenges of living in a patriarchal society despite advances in an apparently progressive society.

The Invisible Chains is set almost thirty years after the Paddy Meehan and Lindsay Gordon series which are set in the 1980s. So I was mindful that although women had made progress in journalism since then, inequalities still remain in the current workplace which was demonstrated by Jane Martinson in her article in *The Guardian* (March 13, 2016) that in the British Press Awards, in 2016, just 20 women were shortlisted along with 94 men. This was the "lowest percentage in six years." Although my character, as a magazine editor, holds a senior role in the workplace, it is important to reflect that gender inequalities persist in society as a whole. Megan, a single mother, rebels against the conformities and expectations of the Scottish society she has been raised in. The most significant action she takes to express this rebellion is by leaving her young son in London with her father, while she pursues her career. It was important that Megan's character emulated similar characteristics to McDermid's Lindsay Gordon, though in a subtler way given that my creative piece is set thirty years after the Gordon series. Yet at times Lindsay Gordon's brash and sometimes prickly behaviour, seemed to be because she was overcompensating for being a female in a largely male environment. Megan does adopt a masculine role when expressing herself in the workplace. In one scene she discovers a body in a river and is clearly in shock. Harry, her police friend and on-off lover, tries to take a sensitive approach to her and suggests she should go back to her hotel to gather her thoughts. However Megan takes umbrage at this as she is focused on getting back to work at the office. She says to him, quite bluntly: "Do you want me to mope about feeling sorry for myself? Soak in a hot bath?" She

ignores Harry's advice and goes back to the office, picking up coffees to take back for her team, because she feels she has a duty to get on with things and meet editorial deadlines. She is therefore adjusting her language and behaviour to suit her environment at that particular moment. However later on in the novel, in private, she does allow herself to cry about her shock at discovering the body which would suggest that she is allowing her feminine side to show by expressing emotion and acknowledging grief for the victim. Megan does also briefly show a different side to her personality when she is with Harry out of the work place. When he picks her up from the airport, after she has been to London to visit her son, he takes her to a restaurant and asks how her son was. She begins to cry and then excuses herself from the table. When she returns to her seat she deflects Harry's attempts to probe further. Having her show some emotion, albeit very briefly, about her son was a conscious decision to show that she was able to disperse with the masculine traits she adopted for her professional role. This short moment of emotion is significant as it marks the start of the blurring of the boundaries of their relationship as the narrative develops. This conflict, between gender expectations as a mother and her own personal professionalism at work, is a theme that features heavily in *The Invisible Chains*. In a scene with Sebastian, the father of her child, she is frustrated at being unable to seamlessly juggle her job with motherhood. When she is called by police to go to the local station and give a statement she has to hand her son back to Sebastian, even though she is supposed to be spending the day with him. "It's just so bloody frustrating," she says. "At least let me go and get him organised. I'll bring him down and meet you in the lobby in ten minutes." Megan experiences a range of emotions around the challenges she faces as a mother and as a woman in the workplace. In *Half the Sky* (1977), Adrienne Rich explored the feelings of frustration and anger felt when trying to balance her needs as a writer and a mother: "I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter of an hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children" (qtd. in Peto). The question of motherhood and how a woman 'should' behave in the role was a significant consideration when developing Megan's characteristics. Her focus was to be solely on her son when she was with him rather than feel

frustrated that her needs were balanced against those of his. Yet there were of course certain discourses surrounding her gender role. Rich's comments on distinguishing the meaning of motherhood and "the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (23) were particularly relevant. Megan is still trying to come to terms with her own feelings about motherhood. She feels guilty about leaving her son in London so she can pursue her career. Yet even when she is at work she is constantly aware of her emotional ties to her son and the way in which her former partner still uses his power to manipulate her. Furthermore in the workplace, she is surrounded by male colleagues who are keen to exert their power and remain in control.

In order to explore this further, I considered *The Last Breath* (2007), the third book in the Paddy Meehan series. Paddy has become a mother, which has certain implications on the decisions she makes and the way she behaves as she now also has her son to consider. In an interview with Peter Guttridge in *The Guardian* (July 29, 2007) Mina described crime as a "very hard genre to feminize." She also referred to female protagonists who are responsible for looking after their mothers when they get older; "She is going to be worried about her brother and sister; she will be making a living while bringing up kids." However this view was one I wanted to challenge with my own creative project. Although Megan does exist in a masculine environment, she strives to resist these gender expectations as described above. Throughout the narrative her focus is on making a success of her new job so she can build a new life for herself and her son in Glasgow. In order to do this though she has to rely on her ex-partner to look after their son in London until she has settled into her new job and found a new home. This made me consider the patriarchal systems which are still very much entrenched in society, with men still predominating power and fathers still holding authority over women and children. When Megan's former partner Sebastian makes a pass at her and she refuses his advances, he then decides to flex his position of power and demand full-time custody of their child. It was important to investigate the oppression experienced by Megan as she, in her professional role, begins to threaten the patriarchal power surrounding her. In *The Invisible Chains*, Megan has been investigating the deaths of two women. One has been

pulled from the River Clyde and another has been dumped in the Botanic Gardens in Glasgow. As her enquiries continue she begins to suspect they are part of a human trafficking ring. Both are Nigerian and cannot be identified. Their bodies both have markings would suggest they have been put through a traditional ritual known as Juju. However Megan begins to feel pressure from her employers and the male-dominated editorial board. She is given gentle warnings to “back off” the story and when she is in Sweden for conference she wakes alone and drowsy in her hotel room, believing she has been the victim of sexual assault. She is confused, guilty, ashamed and destabilised by what happened to her. Yet it is only much later in the narrative the reader learns that it was in fact a woman who drugged her and made her believe she had been attacked. This narrative technique is designed to initially surprise the reader, who has been led to believe Megan has been attacked by a man she had a drink with at the bar. However it transpires that the female perpetrator acted in this way because of the influence and coercive contrail of a man who ultimately is threatened by Megan’s position of power and increasing knowledge. This takes us back to the theme of ‘punishment’ as outlined earlier in relation to Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998). Megan is being punished because of her role, which is a significant focal point in the narrative because it underpins Halberstam’s beliefs that women who deviate from the gender norm are punished. She argues that tomboyism is tolerated in a girl’s childhood yet is punished when it “appears to be the sign of extreme male identification” and when it “threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence” (Halberstam 6). This gender conformation is significant here to Megan and also to the characters created by McDermid, Mina, Smith and Anderson because they exist in patriarchal societies where they are rebelling against these “compliant forms of femininity” (6). Ultimately it is this patriarchal hierarchy and the theme of “punishment” which threatens and usurps Megan from her job and role as a mother when she receives a letter covered in blood, in the post, threatening the life of her son unless she backs off her investigations. She immediately calls Sebastian and tells him to cancel plans for bringing Matthew to see her at the weekend. She claims she is working too hard and claims she can’t be a good mother to

him. She says, “I think you’re right. I’m working so much right now. I don’t have the time or energy to devote to him. I can’t give him what he needs.” As demonstrated through this close analysis of the narrative, Megan has to face an overlap between her professional and private lives. By exploring this intersection she reaches out to Harry for help which allows the reader to observe Megan’s actions which conflict with her usual traits of fierce independence. It was important to reflect on whether the characterisation of Megan was dependant on genre convention and whether this restricted the outcome of the conclusion of the narrative. Significantly, I explored whether Megan was pursuing a fulfilling career at the sacrifice of any elements of her personal life. Initially the narrative was to conclude with Megan quitting her job and returning to London to be with her son. However this seemed to be an expectation of her defined gender role as a mother. Would the reader view Megan differently if she chose an alternative route to the expected route? To contextualise this, it was important to consider the time-frame of *The Invisible Chains*, which is set in 2016, so almost thirty years after the Paddy Meehan and Lindsay Gordon series which are set in the 1980s. Although Megan, as magazine editor, holds a senior role in the workplace, I was mindful that as the creative developed it would be important to reflect that gender inequalities persist in society as a whole. This is an area which required further investigation in order to develop Megan’s character. Thus it was important to consider whether women, in crime fiction, consistently have a vulnerability about them because of their gender. Nicci Gerrard commented in *The Observer* (October 5, 2014) that gender changes the meaning of the protagonist’s behaviour and for a woman to behave like a man can set up a conflict in the viewer. “Women’s behaviour, by contrast, is judged against the norm of their male colleagues: it can never be invisible, never taken for granted.” So these comments echo Judith Butler’s theory about gender being like an improvised performance. So to say that gender is performative is to argue that gender is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler 185). The contemporary crime fiction, which is being examined in this study, has evolved and reflected the changes in society. As the role of women has changed and expanded alongside shifting cultural norms, so too have their roles and jobs in

society. In an interview with Alex Henry, in *Dundee University Review of the Arts* (October 25, 2013), Denise Mina spoke of the observations she made of people's reactions to her novels when she began writing and using lead female protagonists and the differences in law which have affected women's rights. "When I was a girl in the 80s, your husband could legally rape you and you had no recourse to law: he could legally beat you." She goes on to add that it was quite routine for people to ask young girls if they wanted to get married: "We've come such a long way and people forget that." These comments are significant because they imply that gender equality has been achieved in contemporary fiction and, by extension, in modern society. However, although there has been progress, it is vital to acknowledge that women still face complexities and gender inequalities in the workplace today as Megan's experiences show.

My project illustrates the sense of shifting identity for a female protagonist in contemporary Scottish society in the crime fiction genre. By exploring the subversion of identity and gender expectations, I have created a definitive character in Megan, who is still bound by a patriarchal system despite advances in equality. My creative project is set in a post referendum Scotland and with this project the development and progression of the female identity, throughout contemporary crime novels, must also be studied against this political backdrop of devolution which has had an impact on Scottish literature and identity. The parameters of this have shifted during the political transformations of the past seventeen years with the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, a vote on Scottish independence and now Scotland's first female First Minister and also female leaders of opposition parties in the Scottish parliament. Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, may have been applauded for her commitment to gender balance in the Scottish Cabinet but the reality is that there is still a long way to go. Engender is a feminist organisation that has been working in Scotland for twenty years to advance equality between women and men. It claims that women live with gender inequality daily, in ways that range from explicit discrimination and breaches of our human rights, to the relentless undermining portrayals of women in the media and public domain. Social expectations and assumptions rooted in historical gender relations influence all walks of

life, for women and for men, and compromise the equality that has been achieved on paper. On its website, the organisation argues that this “legacy of women’s second class citizenship has not been overcome and continues to define women’s life chances in the 21st century” (Engender). Furthermore, a study, carried out for the TUC by The Work Foundation, showed that women in the UK are increasingly condemned to low-paid, low-skill jobs with just one in 100 young women working in skilled trades in 2011, compared to one in five young men. The report – *The Gender Jobs Split* – revealed how their sex still plays a huge part in determining young people’s careers. Again this ties in with Judith Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’ and social constructions of gender.

Although there has been progress for women in crime fiction, the image of women, in the afore mentioned texts by McDermid, Mina and Anderson, can still be quite depressing because of the patriarchal sexism their protagonists continue to face. Lin Anderson stated in an interview, on September 11, 2016, that despite the way in which the genre has evolved in the last twenty years, there is not enough recognition for female authors and characters. She says that although there are some “huge female players in the genre, men still dominate as in all literary forms.” This is perhaps an apt summary of the way in which female characters illustrate the sense of shifting identity for women in modern society and the challenges they continue to face as they strive against oppression and male hierarchies. At the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2015, Val McDermid spoke about the ways in which the modern crime novel can be used to reflect society’s changing attitudes and values. She described the modern crime novel as “the novel of social history” and said she believes that in future people will use the crime novel as a historic tool to offer insight into life at a specific time. By its very nature, she said, the crime novel can be used to “span the whole of society going as wide or as narrow as you want.” It is this social and cultural context which I wanted to also explore with *The Invisible Chains* by investigating the way in which today’s crime novels can tackle issues which reflect society’s changing attitudes and values. My research explores the idea of ‘invisible victims’ of crime, focusing on the specific crimes of human trafficking and domestic abuse. Both are complex issues which can be difficult to

detect because their victims are kept hidden from view. Therefore the novel also features two female characters who are affected by human trafficking and domestic abuse. One is a girl who has been trafficked to Scotland from Nigeria to reflect that human trafficking is the world's fastest growing global crime, according to global coalition Stop the Traffik and, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "one of the largest sources of income for organised crime." The latest figures from the National Crime Agency's UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) reports that 3,309 people, including 732 children, were potential victims of trafficking for exploitation in 2014, an increase of 21 per cent on 2013. This is an issue I therefore wanted to raise awareness of in my own project as the current position in Scotland is evolving and progressing. On October 1, 2015, the Scottish Parliament passed the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Bill which establishes human trafficking as a specific offence. It also increases the punishment for offenders to a maximum life sentence and ensures more support for victims. I chose Nigeria as the country of origin of my trafficked character, after reading Richard Hoskins' book, *The Boy in the River* (2007) which documents the story of the young boy's torso which was found in the River Thames in London on 2001. The investigation into the boy's death uncovered a trafficking ring that smuggled African children into the UK for ritualistic abuses. The Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance (TARA) project which helps victims who have been trafficked to and in Scotland, confirmed that Nigerian women have consistently been the largest nationality group that TARA has offered support and help to over the years.

With domestic abuse in Scotland, the situation is similarly seen as a major issue. It is of course a threat to all women, in Scotland, regardless of their race, class or wealth. The levels of domestic abuse reported in Scotland have increased by 2.5% over the past year according to the latest official Scottish Government figures. They show that in "2013-14 there were 58,439 incidents of domestic abuse compared to 59,882 in 2014-15." Victims are given legal protection with the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2011. Furthermore, figures from Scottish Women's Aid's annual Census Day survey, in December 2015, revealed that Women's Aid

groups in Scotland were dealing with “around 25,000 new cases of women, children and young people needing support with domestic abuse a year.” The researchers warned this was a ‘conservative’ estimate, and the true figure could be higher. It is another complex and hidden crime which can only be detected when its victims are able to speak out. I wanted to raise awareness of in my own creative narrative through the character of a white, professional, middle-class woman who has been seemingly happily married for years. I wanted to contrast her with the trafficking victim, to highlight that both women are invisible victims of hidden crimes regardless of their race or class. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has consistently spoken out against domestic abuse and said violence against women is causing gender inequality in the UK. Speaking in 2015, at London’s Women in the World summit, and as reported by Radhika Sanghani, in *The Daily Telegraph* (October 9, 2015) she said she believed that domestic violence isn’t just a result of “gender inequality but a cause of gender inequality.” She added, “We’ll never have true gender equality until we eradicate violence against women.” The Scottish Government, in 2016, announced £20 million worth of funding over the next three years to tackle domestic violence in Scotland. The money will be used to speed up the court process, give more support to victims and expand schemes to help rehabilitate offenders. I hope by the end of my novel that both characters will be recognised as individuals and human beings rather than merely invisible victims of crime. Although the two characters are completely different in terms of their nationalities, upbringing and experiences, they are both victims of abuse through physical, sexual and psychological abuse. It is important to give these women a voice so they become visible and real and recognised by society. As *The Invisible Chains* develops, it will be important to reflect and embed the current situation as Scotland’s own legal and social outlook on trafficking and domestic abuse evolves.

To conclude, I would argue that the aforementioned writers all have a recurrent theme in their books. That is, they feature strong female protagonists who reflect the issues faced in society at that time. These female protagonists have invigorated the crime fiction genre for they give the reader the unexpected and therefore bring another perspective to crime

writing. Certainly it seems the novels all share similar traits: they are realistic, dark and social commentaries on contemporary culture giving a fresh insight into the role of women and the challenges they continue to face in contemporary society today.

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