

THE STATE OF LESBIAN DETECTIVE FICTION IN FOUR PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN
NORTH CAROLINA

by
Christy Case

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This study looks at the status of lesbian detective novels in the public library. Online catalogs in four North Carolina libraries, as well as the commercial readers' advisory and cataloging tools NoveList and WorldCat, are examined to determine whether the subject content heading is relevant to the classification of lesbian detective novels. Their adequacy as readers' advisory tools is also evaluated. A brief history of the lesbian detective novel and its definition as part of the mystery genre is included.

The four libraries chosen are the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, Greensboro Public Library, Durham Public Library, and Wake County Public Library. The 25 books chosen are by five authors; Val McDermid, Katherine V. Forrest, Mary Wings, Laurie R. King, and Abigail Padgett. The writers were chosen based on awards their books have won, their readership, and their commercial success and popularity.

Headings:

Libraries – North Carolina

Online catalogs

Subject headings – Special subjects – Fiction

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I. Introduction

The lesbian...seems to seek assimilation. And yet to reenter the mainstream as moral savior, wrapped still in the mantle of lesbian identity, is both a movement of accommodation and an absurd, disruptive performance of perverted righteousness-an individual, compromised performance, possibly the only kind for the moment available to the popular imagination on the bleak streets of the "real" world.

- Anna Wilson, "Death in the Mainstream"

Lesbian detective fiction is a relatively new subgenre of mystery fiction. The first novels featuring a lesbian protagonist solving crimes came out in the late 1970s, and by the mid-1980s a number of such books were being published. In the 1980s, most lesbian detective novels were published by small feminist presses and were read mostly by lesbians. The first lesbian characters, "Katherine V. Forrest's lesbian homicide detective Kate Delafield first appeared in *Amateur City* (1984)...Lauren Wright Douglas's detective Caitlin Reece...Mary Wings's private eye Emma Victor, and ...Val McDermid's journalist-investigator Lindsay Gordon...did not make their initial appearances until 1987." (21-22). Gay detective fiction has enjoyed a slightly longer history. Langham cites Joseph Hansen's *Fadeout*, published in 1970, as the first defining gay detective novel. This subgenre also finds its literary origins in hard-boiled pulp fiction, and also in the literary traditions of masculine heroes like Philip Marlowe (Langham).

A second wave in lesbian detective fiction began in the early 1990s, when Sandra Scoppettone's series was produced by a major publishing house and enjoyed mass audience success. Laurie R. King's *A Grave Talent* (1993) quickly followed suit, winning

an avid heterosexual readership. Priscilla Walton counts 43 detectives by 1995 (41), an explosion that's outpaced the growth of other minority fiction. Other writers of lesbian detective fiction are seeking the same kind of success—finding larger publishers and courting the heterosexual mystery-reading audience.

Lesbian detective fiction is a new body of literature, and it is also one without historical precedent. Although there was homosexual literature before the lesbian detective novel, there is no direct lineage from the lesbian fiction of the 1970s to the lesbian detective fiction of the 1980s. Nor is lesbian detective fiction an outgrowth of traditional, heterosexual and often masculine detective fiction, though the literary techniques employed are similar. Since lesbian detective fiction is a new subgenre, it is difficult to classify in the catalog or on the library shelf.

This subgenre is a combination of two distinct parts: a lesbian protagonist, and a mystery format. Priscilla Walton, in her studies of emerging women's mystery fiction, writes that authors writing about lesbian protagonists can reach their audience through the "appeal of genre" (106), meaning, readers, lesbian or heterosexual, can enjoy these books based on the familiar mystery formula. Sandra Scoppettone, author of one of the first mainstream lesbian detective series, who said that her readership consists of, "a lot more heterosexuals than you, than I, ever suspected. It does seem to have crossed over in the mystery field. I don't think there are lot of...non-mystery readers, reading it." Heterosexual mystery lovers, the "mainstream" audience of the mystery genre, are able to enjoy lesbian detective fiction, even if the protagonist's lifestyle is unfamiliar. Also, lesbians reading these books may already be mystery lovers, too (Walton 106). As a *mystery*, the lesbian detective novel is successful.

As a lesbian, the protagonist in a lesbian detective novel is seemingly at odds with the conservative perspective of traditional mysteries. Nicole Décuré is writing about black women's detective fiction, but she could easily be referring to lesbian detective fiction when she states:

These novels have not been ignored, they have not been written, or at least not published until recently. Why this lateness? Lack of models? Lack of equal opportunity? Is the fact that there have been cat and dog fictional detectives before black women any indication of their status in society? Is crime fiction a genre alien to black consciousness because it "is not a logical choice for those positioned outside the hegemonic institutions of law enforcement"? All these reasons probably have to be taken into account." (159).

Décuré credits the success of black female authors like Toni Morrison for paving the way for the new emergence of ethnic detective fiction, but there is a clear break between the feminist lesbian fiction of the 1970s and 1980s and the lesbian detective of the 1990s. Some feminist critics have disavowed lesbian detective fiction as a step back toward patriarchy, due to the masculine roots of the American detective archetype (see Wilson in the literature review). The seemingly radical re-positioning of the protagonist within the social structure seems to prevent a clear bond between lesbian detective fiction and other detective fiction, so the subgenre remains somewhat orphaned, and treated with skepticism. However, there is a readership, and defining the genre to the point where it is accessible to reader's advisory tools is important.

Several articles examine the difficulty of describing these books by virtue of their content. Anna Wilson's "Death in the Mainstream" states that lesbian mysteries developed as a facet of mystery writing in general, outside of the lesbian collective of fiction that the 1980s produced (1996). She writes, somewhat disparagingly, that a lesbian readership has been grafted onto a genre which did not really intend to cater to

such an audience. A Publisher's Weekly book review agrees, quoting Joan Drury, a writer of lesbian mysteries. "I think the term 'lesbian mystery' is a misnomer. No one calls the rest 'heterosexual mysteries' do they?" Even among lesbian writers who are writing for lesbians, there is some resistance to creating a "Lesbian Detective Fiction" subject heading because doing so might minimize the work's appeal and sales.

Identifying this literature as a subgenre declares it is different from other mystery fiction, and some authors, for various reasons, prefer that their books "fit in," therefore, legitimizing the lesbian heroine as part of the general mystery genre.

Like all new genres, the lesbian detective subgenre faces difficulties when trying to characterize these books. Eva Zaremba, who wrote the earliest lesbian detective novels, comments on the lack of models before her:

For most of my life lesbian detectives did not exist and lesbians generally were invisible in genre fiction, except for their rare appearance in character parts as 'perverts.' So I wanted to write mysteries about a dyke Private Eye. Period. No overt political messages—lesbian, feminist, or otherwise. Just a middle-aged lesbian matter-of-factly going about her job as a PI. Of course, that simple ambition has turned out to be problematic (Walton 21).

Anna Wilson's thesis suggests that lesbian detective novels represent a shift away from the feminist lesbian fiction of the 1970s. Feminist liberation is not the reason these mysteries were written. In fact, the novels may even be a backlash, given the presupposition of hard-boiled fiction that the tenets of society are valid enough to defend. Décuré writes of the absence of any revolution that new minorities have wrought on detective fiction—"There is no innovation in form, but the genre does not really permit it. There is simply a shifting of the place of the characters" (183). Given the mass appeal of formulaic fiction, less literary motivations may be driving the authors to play it straight (pun intended). Dilley reports, "When interviewed, several authors balked at any

inference that what they were doing was ‘political,’ as the ‘feminist’ label might imply. First and foremost, they write popular fiction for a mass audience. Feminist bookstore patrons may expect to read a story where the focus is on the tenets of feminist, but popular fiction customers do not” (143).

Who is the lesbian detective? Walton writes that she is the objectified woman, either femme fatale or victim, of the hard-boiled genre, who is now telling the same stories by “shifting perspective—making the traditional ‘other’ of crime fiction the focus of the private eye narrative—she necessarily involves a politics of identity”(21), becoming a new kind of detective and rejecting traditional characterizations. Not every scholar of detective fiction agrees. Some presume that the lesbian detective is not engaging a politics of identity, but is the same as the archetypal private investigator who came before her. Décuré suggests that too much has been made of the white and male aspects of the traditional detective. Instead, she suggests that the detective is the “other,” rather than the criminal. She quotes Claudia Tate writing of the black female detective:

Their angle of vision allows them to see what white people, especially males, seldom see. With one penetrating glance, they cut through layers of institutionalized racism and sexism and uncover a core of social contradictions and intimate dilemmas which plague all of us, regardless of our race or gender. Through their art, they share their vision of possible resolution with those who cannot see” (Décuré 159).

The process of deduction, the core of the mystery, is easier for those outside of society than for those within its bounds. Being the ‘outsider’ and deconstructing the scene is the greatest asset for any detective, whether Marlowe or Spenser or Jessica Fletcher. The functionality of detection has not changed simply because the narrative’s perspective has changed. Perhaps the shift from male voice to female voice in mysteries is not as radical as it seems. After all, white men are speaking with a socially-constructed identity too;

their perspective is no more “neutral” than Lindsay Gordon’s or Emma Victor’s.

Traditional hard-boiled white men are working to save society from decay, the feminist lesbian detective is working to save people from the decay of society, but the result is the same—a more civilized world.

While authors have rejected the description of their works as radical feminist manifestos, some readers see a quieter, more subversive feminization of mysteries. Dilley condemns the entire concept of detective as outsider:

To justify and explain a woman in such a role implicates the men who came before her. The woman PI is not simply a substitute; she is a critique of the ‘heroic,’ solitary male figure. She is a part of her community. The woman PI shows that to do the job of investigator well, it is necessary to participate in realistic human interactions. (Dilley 33)

She goes on to acknowledge there is a duality. The female investigator exhibits traits of both archetypal hard-boiled detective and traditional woman. Dilley writes, “Women are both the same as, and different from, men; women are both the same as, and different from, other women. Gender is a critical distinction made by society, and yet it is not separable from other factors of identity” (143). The lesbian detective, too, is the same as the traditional detective, and yet, different.

Authors like Ellen Hart continue to reject the politics of difference in favor of the wider appeal of sameness. Dilley writes of an interview, “One part of Jane’s [the character] life is her lesbianism, but that is only one of many facets. Hart was...concerned when Ballantine questioned whether the word “lesbian” should be on the book covers, for example. When a person is identified by her sexuality, according to Hart, it sexualizes everything associated with her” (98). Yet Hart goes on to embrace the softer differences of the woman detective. “Hart wanted Jane to have a family and people

that she loved around her.” Dilley produces more evidence that lesbians are more like heterosexual women than like the prowling, solitary, leather-clad warrior that Walton’s “other,” and comparisons to Marlowe, evoke. Of Scoppettone’s detective she writes, “According to social mythology, Laurano should not value the same qualities in a relationship as heterosexual women—qualities such as commitment, attachment, and love. Laurano, however, has been involved in a committed relationship with her lover, Kip, for over fifteen years” (Dilley 32). Décuré’s analysis agrees with Dilley. “Penny Mickelbury also writes as a lesbian. Wrongly called on the front cover “A Gianna Maglione Mystery,” her books give about equal space to Gianna Maglione and Mimi Patterson” (181).

The lesbian detective is full of contradictions. Dilley criticizes her for not breaking free of the womanly stereotype—relying too much on friends, family, and companions. Yet Wood characterizes her by her independence and her withdrawal from the communion of women. Walton writes that the struggle for women and lesbians, as the objects of detective study, to become the narrative voice—the perspective through which objects are examined—is far from over, yet points to the conformity and crossover appeal of authors like Forrest and King as success stories. The gender-specific characteristics of the detectives stands out more than the sexuality-specific characteristics, that implies that the lesbian detective is buried under an second layer of definition: Mystery → Woman → Lesbian. Publishers, however, do not often bother with the second step.

As lesbian populations in urban and suburban areas in the 1990s become more vocal, they have demanded more reading materials that reflect these populations.

Publishers have begun to respond to this demand. Walton writes, “In particular, gay and lesbian detective fiction has been touted as ‘a sub-genre flexing considerable muscle’ in category fiction” (41).

According to Walton, the first lesbian detective novel was published in 1978 in Canada—A Reason to Kill, by Eva Zaremba (21). Zaremba’s subsequent novels were published by feminist presses, and only ten years later did a lesbian heroine published by a mainstream mystery press with Sandra Scoppettone’s *Everything You Have is Mine* (22). Lesbian detectives fit well into the already established mystery genre. Val McDermid’s works have far more in common with Raymond Chandler than Jane Rule. BluePlace, a message board devoted to lesbian mysteries, is a descendent of email groups for heterosexual mystery works such as for Dorothy L Sayers works and Laurie R. King’s Mary Russell series.

Dilley tries to claim this mainstream trend for feminism. She writes of

Scoppettone’s breakthrough:

Scoppettone’s selling of her manuscript to a large publishing house instead of a small feminist press is, itself, a political act. Scoppettone was able to sell the manuscript for more money, but more important for other “marginal” stories, she also gained entrance into mainstream genre publishing. Other publishers looking for “hot” topics now also look to include a lesbian detective to their list. (37)

That event may have not been a revolution, because the lesbian detective has succeeded in becoming a conservative, formulaic expression of gay fiction, safe enough to sell well by appealing to the new homosexual chic in mass media.

This celebration could be seen as new tolerance and acceptance of the integration of lesbians into their society—or at least, their literature, but it probably has more to do with money. Larger publishers reach a larger audience, which means more exposure for

book sales. Forrest dropped *Naiad* to go to Putnam, and *Mary Wings* has also moved to a larger publisher. Laurie R. King started out in a mainstream press (Walton 107-108).

King writes one of the most successful lesbian detective series with her Kate Martinelli character, suggesting that going mainstream does not hurt the appeal to lesbian readers, as long as the main character remains gay.

Researchers, publishers, and authors constantly point out the appeal to heterosexuals of lesbian detectives. Walton writes of Katherine V. Forrest, “While affirming that she writes for a lesbian audience, Forrest observes: ‘A wider audience has found these books. But I think they’re finding them because people who like good mysteries like good mysteries.’” (107). Walton affirms, “Gay and lesbian books have come out of the closet and are being read by not just the gay constituency but a considerable number of straight readers” (41).

Walton recounts a scene in a mainstream novel:

In Michelle Spring’s *Every Breath You Take*, the reader’s recognition of a ... reference actually functions as a clue in the investigation: PI Laura Principal uncovers the killer of a former roommate, Monica Harcourt, by deducing that Monica’s penchant for reading Katherine V. Forrest’s novels (the murder tampers with a copy of *Murder at the Nightwood Bar* found on the victim’s bedside table) has been misinterpreted as a sign of her lesbianism by a homophobic and homicidal admirer. In solving the mystery, readers acknowledge that not only lesbian readers enjoy lesbian novels. (65)

The fact that the homosexuality in *Every Breath You Take* is a perversion that leads to homicidal fury is lost on Walton, but it is true that reader appeal is much wider than the current state of analysis.

Authors, like Zaremba stated, want to be thought of as a good writer, not simply a stereotype, and ask to be judged in spite of the heroine’s sexuality. This goal can be a triumph for gay politics because the characters are normalized and accepted by

mainstream and therefore, presumably, politically disinterested readers. The reader can either buy into that or specifically seek out characters of specific sexuality (or race, or gender). The reader might be frustrated at the seamlessness of a body of literature where s/he is seeking out the jagged edges.

Since lesbian readers can also be mainstream readers (after dwelling so much on the reverse); the lack of attention given to secondary characters in mainstream fiction who have appeal to lesbian readers is disheartening. No research mentions gay mystery fiction by authors outside of the niche lesbian readership. Even Anthony Slide's bibliography, supposedly a "Critical Guide to over 500 Works in English" of gay and lesbian detective fiction, gives only cursory mention to gay-friendly Robert B. Parker (and no mention of Parker's reoccurring gay cop character Lee Farrell). Slide's book is too British-centric and male-centric to be useful as a reader's advisory tool, yet it sits on the reference shelves of public libraries as the sole authority of its kind.

Articles frequently cite Jonathan Kellerman, whose mysteries contain a gay "best friend," but do not credit or cross-reference him with sensitivity to the homosexual agenda or crossover readership. His mainstream cohorts—like those of Parker, Patricia Cornwell, and Laurie R. King are left out of the dialogue entirely, despite their unabashedly politically correct attempts at attracting gay followers. "Unraveling Puzzles, Gaily" suggests that authors are more concerned with breaking into the mainstream than out of it (1995), but readership of mainstream authors among gays and lesbians is high anyway, perhaps due to the publicity that large-publishers are capable of providing. However, as feminist scholars are grasping at justifications for social revolution in

lesbian detective fiction, the inclusion of such detectives in books that are intended to appeal first and foremost to a mainstream, straight audience seems warranted.

Now that popular lesbian detectives have successfully broken into general mysteries with success, there may be room for more accessible fiction catering to special audiences. Some authors, now empowered, are finding dissatisfaction with large publishers. Stories with well-adjusted, “assimilated” lesbian detectives are not as attractive to some readers as they were in the early 1990s—or it may be that now that such mainstream novels have been written, something new is desired by the audience. As Val McDermid moves back to a feminist press, as a ‘political act,’ there is concern about whether her appeal to heterosexual mystery-reading audiences will continue and whether the public library will continue to acquire her works. The third chapter examines whether public libraries are currently adequately handling lesbian detective novels.

II. Literature Review

M.A. Wood's dissertation, Re/Sisters in Crime: Politics and Sexuality in Lesbian Detective Novels (2000), is the current, definitive work on lesbian detective novels. She divides the lesbian detective genre into three subgenres: Sleuths, Private Eyes, and Police Procedurals. For each of the three categories, she provides a history of its development and a feminist interpretation of the texts. Her analysis focuses on the struggle between the lesbian detective as activist and the social institutions that comprise mystery setting and plot.

Wood makes several relevant points about the categorization and role of lesbian detective fiction. First is the mystery formula itself, the act of "detection." She draws a parallel between the homosexual's lifestyle in America and the detective's by focusing on the themes of detection and concealment. According to Wood, lesbians during the Cold War were familiar with deceiving the outside world about their own sexuality, and detecting other lesbians similarly hidden in the community (24-25). The 1940s and 1950s represented a more hostile time for homosexuals than the previous decades after the First World War, and lesbians had to, in a sense, go underground. Thus, the task of negotiating secrets makes a lesbian detective a suitable solver of mysteries.

This theme plays another role in police procedurals, where the lesbian detective is most likely to be closeted (197), and after coming out faces the consternation of professional peers who represent the social institution. The majority of lesbian detective

novels are police procedurals, perhaps because procedurals are the most conservative of the lesbian detective novels, and most stylistically like heterosexual police procedurals. Since police procedurals entail a community (the police force), they are more representative of the conformist social fabric, where the lesbian is least at odds with the institutions that may have a part in her oppression. Procedurals are the most successful “cross-over” novels, for lesbian authors seeking a larger heterosexual audience. Wood writes, “The police procedural is the defining lesbian detective genre of the 1990s: it points out the limits of institutional inclusion...her ability to affect social change is circumscribed by her inclusion in the state’s machinations” (5).

Much of Wood’s analysis concerns the myth of the traditional detective and the ways in which the lesbian detective is both a threat and a conformist to that myth. Wood lauds characters who attempt to disrupt the status quo, even to the point of breaking the law, and suggests that they are still conforming to the formula of a mystery. The victim and criminal may have switched positions, but the functionality that connects them is the same. Of Mary Wings novels, she writes “violence and injustice are understood as products of the social order, not threats to its legitimacy” (Wood, 12). Wood goes on to write of the traditional detective and the lesbian detective:

The private eye instead appears reactionary: he laments the decline of agrarian democracy and the privileged position it afforded white heterosexual men like him. Unlike the male hard-boiled private eye, who relies upon his race and gender privilege at the same time that he decries his marginalization, the lesbian private eye struggles with her fundamental inability to affect social change. (13)

Wood dwells on the low position in society that lesbians, and therefore, lesbian detectives hold, to perhaps an excessive degree. She places perhaps undue importance on hate crime legislation and anti-discrimination laws, suggesting that their existence or absence has a

direct impact on the work of any lesbian detective novel, because they frame the social society in which the lesbian detective works. This bias oversimplifies the position of the lesbian detective in her community (as either repressed or protected) and in detective novels, a genre that is complex and often filled with contradictions. Lesbian detective novels do not have to operate in reality at all—they are fiction.

Wood offers an explanation of why the mystery genre is more receptive to characters of alternative sexuality than those of minority ethnic groups or even women, although she does not examine this issue in depth. She quotes Barbara Wilson, a writer of lesbian detective fiction, “Investigators may be threatened, drugged, beat up, tortured and left for dead, but their sexual boundaries are never disturbed” (94). Wood touches on this again in her analysis of the traditional private eyes, like Marlowe and Sam Spade. The detective stands apart, and his sex life rarely coincides with a case. Therefore, lesbianism can be considered part of the character of the detective but not instrumental to the plots or settings, which create the mystery formula. Lesbianism may be at odds with the systems of authority in a novel, but it is mostly irrelevant to the victim and criminal elements, whereas race and gender are harder to conceal.

Wood also offers more conventional reasons for why mainstream audiences and lesbian audiences alike enjoy this class of mysteries. She writes that some mystery fans claim to enjoy reading mysteries because they “learn something” (75), often history or culture that has more to do with the setting of a novel than the crime itself. Wood writes,

Lesbian detective novels function as popular chronicles of lesbian and gay histories. Since the successful resolution of a crime requires the detective to reconstruct the past, lesbian detective novels provide readers with the opportunity to explore lesbian and gay history and historiography, and to consider the role of both popular literature, and ‘the past’ in the establishment of individual and community, histories, and identities. (Wood, 4)

She uses the same justification to explain the predominantly white heterosexual male fascination with lesbian pulp fiction during the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting that they read to learn about a culture with which they had no contact or experience. Lesbian detective novels have an adequate and much-touted readership of “mainstream” women, i.e. white, heterosexual, middle-class, and Wood’s argument of learning something new is a more appealing advertising point than the alternative touted by Walton and Wilson, who argue that the books and characters represent assimilation into an accepting mass culture.

Heterosexual women may want to read about lesbian detectives because they know little about lesbian culture and want to know more, and Woods suggests that lesbians can also read lesbian detective fiction in order to learn more about the history of the gay and lesbian movement. Wood, and Décuré, as discussed below, both stress the importance of the setting rather than the importance of plot and form. Any social commentary in lesbian detective fiction, beyond its merits as a good read, largely depends on the audience it is trying to reach.

Anna Wilson’s article, “Death and the Mainstream: Lesbian Detective Fiction and the Killing of the Coming-Out Story,” shares Wood’s assumptions. She writes, “The detective story has overwhelmingly been seen as a conservative genre, the passive tool of hegemonic social control.” However, instead of tracing the development of the lesbian detective genre back to the Cold War, Wilson describes it as a reactionary form to the feminist literary mood of the 1970s.

In 1984, when the lesbian detective first emerged to do battle on fictive mean streets, the lesbian reader might well have perceived her own environment as

increasingly hostile... The focus of the women's movement had gradually shifted away from an emphasis on exploring and enhancing the "liberated" self toward a preoccupation with that self as embattled and endangered... A universalized ideal of "woman" as common factor and communal ideal was yielding to a conception of multiple ethnicities and genders. Feminism now saw women as inexorably socially constructed and recognized the weight of that social structure upon the individual.

Wilson theorizes that lesbian detective fiction signifies a political movement concerned with engaging social ills—a reaction to previous fiction with characters that sought to isolate themselves. To be an “out” lesbian is no longer enough to bring about the mythic feminist revolution, so the lesbian takes to the streets.

Wilson expresses her doubts about the choice of genre for this social engagement. She describes detective fiction, and by proxy, lesbian detective fiction, as the “passive tool of hegemonic social control,” where “the reader is narcotized” by the “oblivion of popular culture.” She says that the hallowed subversive elements of feminism in new women’s detective fiction, touted by Maureen Reddy (and Wood) do not have the power to overcome the formulaic structure of the mystery genre, what Wilson calls “generic force.” Wilson claims that the lesbian literary genre is being replaced by the lesbian detective genre by lesbian readers, and that is unfortunate because the lesbian detective novel is an assimilationist, mass-culture form that re-marginalizes lesbians. Her use of the term “mainstream” in her title is telling, and she despairs the conformist nature of the lesbian detective even as Wood and Walton are celebrating its success. The term “killing,” even as a pun, is also suggestive of the vehemence of Wilson’s article. The lesbian detective novel is far too *detective* and not *lesbian* enough.

Ultimately, Wilson acknowledges that this shift in ideology might be welcome to a world-weary, and ultimately, middle-class audience. She summarizes Bonnie

Zimmerman, a feminist researcher disappointed by popular lesbian literature, “Zimmerman glances ruefully at the return to bourgeois individualism signaled by the lesbian couple who read detective fiction instead of utopian fantasy as they manipulate their expensively obtained donor sperm in their suburban fastness.” This critique of an empty middle-class existence could just as easily be attributed to Raymond Chandler, and the parallel between the hard-boiled detective’s disgust with society and the feminist’s is telling. Zimmerman sees the lesbian reader hiding behind middle-class conformity, but Wilson is more accepting. She sees integration and the normalizing of lesbianism are valid feminist goals.

Wilson wrote in 1996 that the cross-over fiction, between lesbian and mainstream, was growing, and that big publishers may have the say in the next, coming evolution of lesbian fiction. She is concerned with the lesbian readership, but the heterosexual readership is proving just as important to the growth of the genre. Scoppettone, Cornwell, King, and Padgett may be even more welcomed by critics, since they are trying to insinuate the lesbian detective into a heterosexual audience, instead of trying to “narcotize” the lesbian reader.

The perspective on the lesbian detective changes slightly if the detective is a woman of color. Nicole Décuré, in “In Search of Our Sisters’ Mean Streets: The Politics of Sex, Race, and Class in Black Women’s Crime Fiction,” analyzes the field of black women’s detective fiction, a body of work even smaller than (white) lesbian detective fiction. Décuré, too, places the African-American female detective outside of the hegemony of traditional detective fiction, but she sees a clear and complementary bond between black women detectives and the black literary tradition of vanguard authors like

Toni Morrison. This connection helps ground minority fiction in a way that lesbian detective novels, according to Wilson, do not benefit from in their own literary history. Décuré writes primarily about class distinctions. The lesbian, she says, can hide or display her sexuality at will; the African American does not have that option. Perhaps this is why African American women detectives tend to be snoops (i.e., detection is tied in with their non-detecting profession), rather than independent entities who can move through layers of society.

Décuré has written a number of relevant texts on detective fiction in general and lesbian detective fiction in particular. Her article, “The Fear of Telling It Like It Is - Concealment Tactics In Rita Mae Brown Fiction,” focuses on the tactics Brown’s characters use to hide aspects of their lives from those around them. Rita Mae Brown is an author of lesbian fiction with cross-over success in the mystery genre (she, as lesbian, writes heterosexual mysteries for a heterosexual audience). Décuré has also written articles on Katherine V. Forrest’s Kate Delafield and Barbara Wilson’s lesbian detective fiction. She finds a successful path between conformity and difference in their works, in line with Wood’s analysis.

This duality in lesbian detective fiction, which allows the novels to be enjoyed by lesbian and heterosexual audiences with the same motivations for reading (to learn something new, to be reassured that the social order is upheld), presents a problem to cataloguers. Are these works the same as other mystery novels, or are they unique enough to receive a specific subject heading, along the lines of “Mystery – Lesbian”? Fiction subject heading cataloguing is difficult and not well practiced to begin with. Public libraries are outsourcing their cataloging more and more, and when the lesbian aspect of

the detective novels is not apparent even in the dust jackets or summary of the book, perhaps asking for uniformity in a genre with such variation is asking too much. However, studies of catalog usage and reader's advisory resources for fiction in specialized topics provides some evidence as to the importance of cataloguing lesbian detective fiction as fully as possible.

In his study, Scaling Down Transaction Log Analysis: A Study of OPAC Usage at a Small Academic Library, Mitake Holloman presents a number of statistics concerning card catalog usage at libraries. Though he focuses on academic libraries, the literature he uses suggests trends that can be applied to public libraries as well. In his study of the transaction logs at a small community library, he finds that over 83% of the 5,479 searches were subject searches. (2). He also found, "about 35% of the searches resulted in zero records being retrieved. Over 60% of the zero-hit searches were caused by problems with the controlled vocabulary (2)." He cites similar studies that present subject heading searching ranging from 26% to 52%.

The factors that produce failure, on the user end, are not enough knowledge of the topic to know the controlled vocabulary (44), lack of technical expertise at navigating an OPAC system (9), and getting too much information to sort through (44). The factor that produces failure on the system design end is a lack of detailed information in the catalog records available for searching (10). The ability to search across multiple fields with keywords, and to have enough data within those records to make them appear in keyword searches are what Holloman concludes are necessary to improve OPAC searching.

This research into the usability of card catalogs is relevant because the findings reveal trouble spots that can greatly hamper the ability of public library OPACs to act as

reader's advisory tools. Almost two-thirds of the search failures were caused by the vocabulary of the subject headings. Holloman cites a 1996 study by Ferl which suggests that library users have the most trouble when they have the least information about a topic. Ferl's study shows that library staff, faculty and graduate students are far more adept at navigating a catalog system than undergraduate users because they know what they are looking for (10), and, significantly, will often use the author and title searches instead of subject heading searches (44). This data suggests librarians should be involved in readers' advisory assistance, since they have both the technical and subject knowledge necessary for success.

C.L. Quillen concludes much the same thing in her study of non-OPAC sources of information. For successful readers' advisory, she recommends that a proficient librarian assist a patron with database tools. Helping Readers Find Books: An Evaluation of Four Readers' Advisory Sources, Quillen's study of four reader's advisory services (*NoveList*, *Amazon.com*, *Now Read This*, and *What Do I Read Now?*), employs a similar methodology to this project. She examines the subject headings for 10 romance novels across the four sources. Quillen does not examine the subject headings at Durham County Library (the source of her book list) as part of her research at all, because she considers OPAC fiction headings useless as a reader's advisory tool, and suggests that the OCLC/LC Fiction Project is still too much in its infancy to have an impact on libraries at the local level.

New tools like those in Quillen's analysis may represent better resources for reader's advisory than the traditional card catalog, but it's apparent that the OPAC is still the central database for most library systems. The focus of this research is an examination

of the connection between the lesbian detective genre and its representation in search tools such as the public library catalog. Are these works adequately represented, and what is the benchmark?

III. Methodology

This study looked at how a specific fiction sub-genre is cataloged in public libraries. Twenty-five books in eight series by five authors were chosen as representative of mystery fiction with lesbian detective protagonists published between 1987 and 2000. The list of books was compared to the holdings of four library systems in urban areas of North Carolina. The data gathered consist of subject headings, which were examined in order to evaluate how accessible these books to those seeking books from a specific genre.

North Carolina was chosen as the site for the research due to my proximity to and familiarity with the area. The libraries chosen were from four metropolitan areas in the Piedmont region of the state; Charlotte, Greensboro, Durham, and Raleigh. These are the four most populous municipalities along the Interstate 85 corridor in North Carolina. The four library systems are the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County, the Greensboro Public Library, the Durham County Library, and the Wake County Public Libraries. All four systems serve populations of over 200,000, and the libraries are expanding with adequate support from their patron base.

I accessed the online catalogs of each library system through their website. For the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County, I selected the HTML Browse-Only Access portal for the catalog. The Charlotte library uses a Dynix system. The Greensboro Public Library and Durham County Public Library catalogs are accessible

through WebPac. Wake County Public Library has an HTML-based interface called iPac, produced by the same company that makes WebPac, EpixTech.

I tried to choose novels that were likely to be found in the public libraries I was investigating. Therefore I chose established authors in lesbian detective fiction, such as Katherine V. Forrest and Lindsay Gordon. I avoided emerging authors like Lauren Maddison, author of Witchfire (a finalist for the Lesbian Mystery category of the Lambda Literary Awards) in favor of more well known authors. I sought a range of writing styles, publishers, and audiences, from mysteries written by lesbians for a lesbian audience, such as books by Mary Wings and Lindsay Gordon, to the mysteries written by heterosexuals for a predominantly heterosexual audience (also known as “mainstream”), such as works by Laurie R. King and Abigail Padgett. I sought prolific authors with well-established series featuring a reoccurring main character. Series often inspire long-term commitment and a devoted reader-following that influences the collection development of local libraries.

The source I used to select the authors and books for my study was NoveList, an online database of fiction and an electronic resource for reader’s advisory in public libraries. I chose the lesbian detective novels from the award lists for the mystery genre. NoveList contains lists of awards by genre. Katherine V. Forrest won the *Lambda Literary Award* in 1989 for The Beverly Malibu and in 1991 for Murder by Tradition. Mary Wings won in 1993 for Divine Victim. Laurie R. King won the *Edgar Allan Poe Award* in 1994 for A Grave Talent. Val McDermid won the *Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction* in 2000, the *Anthony Award for Best Novel* in 2001, the *Dilys Award*

(2001), and the *Macavity Award for Best Mystery* in 2001 for *A Place of Execution*. She also won the British *Gold Dagger Award* in 1995 for *Mermaids Singing*.

Abigail Padgett has not won any awards, but her novels, *Blue* and *The Last Blue Plate Special*, are popular among both mainstream and lesbian readers. Like Laurie R. King, writes primarily for a heterosexual audience, and has both a series with a heterosexual protagonist—Bo Bradley, and one with a lesbian protagonist, Blue McCarron. Val McDermid wrote of *The Last Blue Plate Special* in the *BluePlace*

I'm so excited about the new Blue from Abby -- I loved the first one so much, it seemed to me, along with Nicola Griffith's Blue Place (why all those blues?) to mark a sort of coming of age of lesbian crime fiction; novels which, although they clearly dealt with what it means to attempt to live a gay life, dealt with the wider world, with serious issues, in a head-on way. They weren't looking inward, but rather seeking to encompass the world in a way that hadn't been much addressed up until then. (McDermid, "Abigail Padgett")

Padgett also made one reader's list of the top lesbian authors (along with McDermid and King).

The five authors were chosen out of the more than 40 writers of lesbian detective fiction available, according to *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hardboiled Tradition* (Walton 41), based broadly on their reputations, series, and the likelihood of being found on a public library's shelves. Of the four chosen from the awards lists, Katherine V. Forrest, Val McDermid ("Denise Mina"), and Mary Wings (Wings) are vocal activists for the gay and lesbian movement. Val McDermid, the only non-American author in this sample (she's Scottish and lives in London) has two detectives--Lindsay Gordon, a reporter, and Kate Brannigan, a private eye. Mary Wings' character Emma Victor begins as a sleuth and as the series progresses becomes a private investigator. Katherine V. Forrest's Kate Delafield is a police officer with the Los Angeles Police

Department. Laurie R. King's lesbian series stars Kate Martinelli, an officer with the San Francisco Police Department. Her other series, with a heterosexual protagonist, focuses on Mary Russell, a sleuth who works with Sherlock Holmes in 1920s England. Abigail Padgett's lesbian protagonist is Blue McCarron, an independent sociologist, while her heterosexual protagonist is Bo Bradley, a social worker.

Applying Wood's subgenre classifications to the detectives is slightly problematic—some characters shift occupations throughout the series. I consider them stratified as follows. The sleuths are Emma Victor, Blue McCarron, and Mary Russell. These characters are the traditional independent and often wealthy meddlers of early British mystery fiction, similar to Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes. The private investigators are Lindsay Gordon and Kate Brannigan. These two women are most like the heroes of the traditional American hard-boiled detective fiction, such as those by Raymond Chandler and Robert B. Parker. Wood writes that reporters are private investigators, so I use her analysis concerning Lindsay Gordon. The characters in the police procedurals, which concern police officers working with departments to solve crime, are Kate Delafield, Kate Martinelli and Bo Bradley. Bo Bradley works within the criminal justice system and relies on governmental and social institutions for support, so I include her with police officers.

Five books by each author were selected, in one series, if possible. For the two mainstream authors, I also selected works from their mainstream series, to see if the subject treatment was different for their series featuring a heterosexual protagonist than their lesbian detective series. King has written four Kate Martinelli novels and I chose The Moor from her Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes series to balance the list. I chose

Padgett's two Blue McCarron novels, and three of her Bo Bradley novels. The full list of titles is in Appendix A.

For each title in each system's card catalog, the following information was collected: author, title, number of copies, publication date, publisher, whether or not the book was in the library, whether or not other books in the series were collected, whether or not there was a series/detective heading, and subject headings. I initially looked for related-works functionality in the catalog, but none of the systems had this feature.

The point of interest is the subject headings, especially subject headings that denote 1) the series/detective, and 2) the sexuality of the protagonist. Do libraries provide that information in a searchable field? If not, the only way to find those books using the card catalog is to know the title or author, and readers must rely on outside sources (booklists, websites, readers' advisory staff) to begin searching for works in a genre of interest.

Two comprehensive databases were chosen to compare to the subject headings of public libraries: WorldCat and NoveList. WorldCat is OCLC's master database of library catalog records (Over 47 million according to their website) and contains the most complete cataloging information available on published works in the United States and abroad. Three of the four libraries in this survey, Charlotte, Durham, and Wake, are members of OCLC and their library holdings are accessible through WorldCat.

NoveList is a database of popular fiction, developed primarily as a tool for readers' advisory in public libraries. Features include extensive related-works functions, cross-referencing, reviews and recommendations by libraries, publishers, and readers, a resource of award lists and genre lists, and interviews and features on specific authors.

NoveList uses standardized and natural language subject headings—Its drawback in comparison to WorldCat is its smaller database—some books are not listed at all, including Mary Wings' She Came By the Book, the most readily-available Emma Victor novel in the catalogs examined. NoveList attempts to catalog popular fiction, while WorldCat catalogs all works.

I retrieved records for the 25 titles in six databases. Four of the databases are public library systems in North Carolina, and two are commercial databases commonly used as library aids. I compared the subject headings for each title and looked specifically for three types of information—a mystery heading, a detective or series heading, and a lesbian fiction heading. I evaluated which databases were most accessible for subject-based searching in the genre of lesbian detective fiction based on this sampling.

IV. Results

My search of the holdings of four libraries produced the following results.

Charlotte holds 20 of 25 titles (80%). Durham holds 23 of 25 titles (92%). Greensboro holds 16 of 25 titles (64%), and Wake holds 23 of 25 titles (92). Altogether, 82 books of the 100 searched for were listed in the library catalogs.

Charlotte does not hold the following titles; She Came in Drag or She Came in a Flash, by Mary Wings, Amateur City by Katherine V. Forrest, or Moonbird Boy or Strawgirl by Abigail Padgett. Durham does not hold She Came in a Flash, by Mary Wings or Amateur City by Katherine V. Forrest. Greensboro does not hold Booked for Murder, Conferences are Murder, or Deadline for Murder by Val McDermid, or She Came in Drag, She Came Too Late, She Came to the Castro, or She Came in a Flash by Mary Wings, or Amateur City or The Beverly Malibu by Katherine V. Forrest. Wake does not hold She Came too Late or She Came in a Flash by Mary Wings.

Each library holds at least one book by each author. All of Laurie R. King's works are held by each library. She Came in a Flash by Mary Wings is the only novel not in any library. Amateur City by Katherine V. Forrest is absent from three of the four libraries. Two other titles by Mary Wings, She Came in Drag and She Came Too Late are absent from two libraries.

Greensboro does not hold nine of the 21 lesbian detective titles (42%), but it holds all four of the novels with a heterosexual protagonist (The Moor, Strawgirl, Moonbird

Boy, and Child of Silence). Durham, Charlotte, and Wake have a more inexplicable distribution of held and absent books, with no obvious pattern of discrimination in selection.

In Charlotte, 11 of 20 titles had subject headings (55%), while five of 10 lesbian titles with subject headings were delineated "lesbians" in some way (50%). In Durham, 19 of 23 titles had subject headings (82%), with 10 of 16 lesbian titles (62%) with subject headings were delineated. In Greensboro, only five of 16 titles had subject headings (31%), and none of the four lesbian titles had subject headings that indicated their lesbian content. In Wake County, 14 of 23 titles had subject headings (60%), and eight of 12 lesbian titles with subject headings had an entry delineating them as lesbian detective fiction.

Library	Charlotte	Greensboro	Durham	Wake
Number of Held Books	20	16	23	23
% of Held Books	80	64	92	92
# of Books with Subject Headings	11	5	19	14
% of Books with Subject Headings	55	31	82	60
# of Lesbian Detective Titles with Subject Headings Compared to Lesbian Detective Holdings	5 of 10	0 of 4	10 of 16	8 of 12
% of Lesbian Detective Titles with Subject Headings Compared to Lesbian Detective Holdings	50	0	62	66
% of Lesbian Detective Titles with Subject Headings Compared to Total Holdings	25	0	43	34

NoveList lists 23 of the 25 titles (92%), missing Conferences are Murder and She Came Too Late. Of the 19 lesbian detective titles held, 18 (94%) have a lesbian detective subject heading, often "Lesbian Mystery Fiction." WorldCat contains records for every

book. Eighteen of 21 lesbian detective titles have appropriate subject headings (85%). Two of Laurie R. King's titles, A Grave Talent and Night Work do not, while her other two titles, To Play the Fool and With Child mention lesbianism only in the abstract section of the record.

Durham has the most holdings and most detailed holding records. The alternative reader's advisory sources have comparable holdings to Durham, but more than double the success rate on subject heading returns for lesbian detective fiction.

V. Conclusions and Further Research

Lesbian detective novels are collected earnestly by public libraries. The four libraries, on average, held 82% of the novels on my sample list.

Several avenues for further research became apparent through the course of this study. This project could be repeated with a more comprehensive, stratified list of novels that take into account the ethnicity of the protagonists and nationality of the authors. More emerging authors could be included, such as Lauren Madisson, as well as authors whose books are only nominally part of lesbian detective fiction, such as Patricia Cornwell and Rita Mae Brown.

Given the success of finding these lesbian detective novels in each of the four library systems, the appearance of appropriate subject headings for only 44% of the titles, overall, is disappointing. NoveList and WorldCat's comparable rates of success, 84% and 85%, seem to fulfill reasonable expectations. Charlotte, Durham, and Wake are all members of OCLC and WorldCat, and all four libraries have access to and promote NoveList as a reader's advisory tool. Therefore, further research into the gap between these two types of reader's advisory search aids—the online catalog and the commercial database—could be done.

Also, internal library policies may have an impact on how subject headings are applied to fiction. Collection development, cataloging outsourcing, and budgeting may all

have an effect on how the book appears in library records. Broadening the scope, what part does publisher advertising play in the identification and categorization of a book?

Other reader's advisory tools like home-grown book lists can supplement the lapses in the online catalog. Wake County's list of Lesbian and Gay Detectives contains four of the five authors in this study (it omits Abigail Padgett). Examining the use of book lists and book clubs as reader's tools, especially in comparison to usage of the catalog and commercial databases, as well as word of mouth, community programs, and library reference services, can provide a clearer picture of where the lesbian detective genre sits in the library, and why. Research patterned after Holloman's study of OPAC retrieval records might reveal specific ways to improve online searching based on user input.

Lesbian detective novels are well-collected by public libraries in the metropolitan areas of North Carolina, and therefore, would seem to be of legitimate interest to the populations these systems serve. Connecting the readers to the works takes more than simple acquisitions, however, especially in small niche genres where browsing may not be effective. This research revealed inconsistencies in the most common reader's advisory tool, the public library online catalog. Other projects may reveal further gaps and methods to improve fiction services that can be applied not only to lesbian detective novels but also to other emerging fiction trends.

Appendix A

Results of Lesbian Subject Headings Searches for Alternative Sources

<u>Title</u>	<u>NoveList</u>	<u>WorldCat</u>
<u>McDermid, Val</u>		
Report for Murder	yes	yes
Blue Genes	yes	no
Booked for Murder	yes	yes
Conferences are Murder	not in database	yes
Deadline for Murder	yes	yes
<u>Wings, Mary</u>		
She Came Too Late	not in database	yes
She Came in Drag	yes	yes
She Came in a Flash	yes	yes
She Came by the Book	yes	yes
She Came to the Castro	yes	yes
<u>Forrest, Katherine V.</u>		
Liberty Square	yes	yes
Amateur City	yes	yes
The Beverly Malibu	yes	yes
Murder at the Nightwood Bar	yes	yes
Murder by Tradition	yes	yes
<u>King, Laurie R.</u>		
A Grave Talent	no	no
To Play the Fool	yes	yes (in abstract)
With Child	yes	yes (in abstract)
Night Work	yes	no
The Moor	n/a	n/a
<u>Padgett, Abigail</u>		
Blue	yes	yes
The Last Blue Plate Special	yes	yes
Moonbird Boy	n/a	n/a
Child of Silence	n/a	n/a
Strawgirl	n/a	n/a

Appendix B

Results: Subject Headings by Title

Title	Total Holdings	Holdings with Subject Headings	Holdings with Lesbian Subject Headings
A Grave Talent	4	1	0
Amateur City	1	1	1
Blue	4	3	0
Blue Genes	4	3	0
Booked for Murder	4	3	3
Child of Silence	4	0	n/a
Conference for Murder	3	2	1
Deadline for Murder	4	3	3
Liberty Square	4	4	3
Moonbird Boy	3	1	n/a
Murder at the Nightwood Bar	4	2	2
Murder by Tradition	4	0	0
Night Work	4	4	0
Report for Murder	4	1	1
She Came by the Book	4	3	3
She Came in Drag	2	2	2
She Came to the Castro	3	1	1
She Came Too Late	2	0	0
Strawgirl	3	2	n/a
The Beverly Malibu	3	0	0
The Last Blue Plate Special	4	3	3
The Moor	4	4	n/a
To Play the Fool	4	2	0
With Child	4	4	0
She Came in a Flash Not Held			

Appendix C

Books Not Held By Libraries

McDermid, Val

Booked for Murder	Greensboro
Conference for Murder	Greensboro
Deadline for Murder	Greensboro

Wings, Mary

She Came in a Flash	Durham, Greensboro, Charlotte, Wake
She Came in Drag	Greensboro, Charlotte
She Came to the Castro	Greensboro
She Came Too Late	Greensboro, Wake

Forrest, Katherine V.

Amateur City	Durham, Greensboro, Charlotte
The Beverly Malibu	Greensboro

Padgett, Abigail

Strawgirl	Charlotte
Moonbird Boy	Charlotte

The five titles by Laurie R. King were held in all four libraries.

Total: 82 of 100 titles held, 18 of titles not held.

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