

THE DOLLUS SYNDROME: DIVERSITY IN CRIME FICTION

BY SARA PARETSKY

Acclaimed author Paretsky, currently serving as President of the Mystery Writers of America, calls on publishers, writers, and readers to join together in an effort to raise consciousness about the need for greater diversity in publishing as a whole and, in particular, in the crime-fiction genre.

Some years ago, the Dodgers fired executive Al Campanis for explaining that there weren't many African American Major League managers because they lacked "the necessities" for management. No one ever asked me, but I thought it was because black ballplayers suffer from the DOLLUS syndrome: They Don't Look Like Us. As a corollary, at that time, black players had to outperform whites to get into the majors, and by and large, journeymen, not stars, become managers.

As the new president of the Mystery Writers of America (MWA), I'm concerned about the way DOLLUS and its corollaries seem to operate in the publishing world. Many of the African American crime writers of the nineties have been dropped by the big print houses and have had to turn either to self-publishing or to other genres. Angela Henry, who used to keep a blog dedicated to African American crime writers, discontinued it because almost all the writers were dropped by their publishers. Some have turned to erotica or to romance, others to self-publishing, but they can't get traction for their crime fiction in New York.

Fiction in general and crime fiction in particular are filled with journeymen writers. None of us want to acknowledge that we may be one of that crowd—like the children in Lake Wobegon, we all want to be above average.

Writing is an intensely lonely occupation, in which you work in private to expose your most personal self to the outside world. When a publisher drops a writer, it feels like a condemnation of the self. It's hard to find the strength to say, I am good enough, when the publishing community says you're not.

Publishing is a world in free-fall these days: fewer print titles, smaller advances, fewer marketing dollars. And while the Internet provides other avenues for writers, self-publishing is a labor-intensive, poorly remunerated route for most.

Publishers, looking for bigger successes than were required in the past, drop writers who aren't heavy hitters. One African

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American crime writer tells me her agent says publishers don't believe there's a market for books with black protagonists: it's hard to crack the white ceiling. Walter Mosley and Attica Locke are among the very few black crime writers published by a Big Five imprint. Gar Anthony Haywood and Gary Phillips, both very fine writers, are with small indie presses. Valerie Wilson Wesley and Barbara Neely haven't written crime fiction in at least a decade.

African writers have noticed a particular publishing bias: "My . . . friend Mercy, when she heard about my novel, congratulated me: I had found out 'what the white people wanted to read and given it to them,'" says prizewinning Nigerian writer Adaobi Nwaubani. She adds, "Success for an African writer . . . depends on the West, [and Western publishers want] savage entertainment: stories about ethnic cleansing, child soldiers, human trafficking . . . the stereotypes Africans abhor." (*New York Times*, November 29, 2014).

America notoriously publishes few novels in translation, but in the crime writing world today, the hottest foreign writers are from the coldest countries: Scandinavia. Foreign, exotic, but—like us. (I've been told that Poland is the next likely hot crime-fiction spot.) We translate very few Asian or Latin American crime writers, and the most popular black detective from Africa is created by a white Scotsman.

African Americans face a hurdle similar to African writers. Gangs, drugs, housing projects, school dropouts, pregnant teens, that's the face of black America that white America stereotypically knows. The contempt with which a sizable white minority—in Congress and around the country—views the president bears witness to these enduring stereotypes. Fox News vilely referred to the First Lady as “Obama’s Baby Mama,” not once, but many times.

Stereotypes and contempt come from many sources, but popular culture—books, movies, video games—is a potent part of the mix. These media often give us the “savage entertainment”—the black rapist, the female victim—that feeds the stereotype.

Shortly before Walter Mosley published *Devil in a Blue Dress*, I was working with an African American writer in Chicago. Andrea Smith was creating what didn't exist then—a black female cop. I loved this character. Andrea opened a window for me onto black urban life I didn't know, a world where aunts owned beauty shops, and mothers worried about their daughters getting close to 30 without a husband, a world of camaraderie, with childhood friendships that lasted through adulthood.

By the time we had a polished piece of writing, Walter Mosley, Grace Edwards, and Eleanor Taylor Bland had all published their first novels. My friend's work was at least as good as theirs, but I couldn't generate interest in it in the editors I knew.

One St. Martin's editor told Andrea that they liked her work, but they were already publishing Eleanor Taylor Bland: we have our black writer—like medical and law schools used to tell women applicants: “We have our woman student.” An agent's claim that Andrea's detective wasn't believable because she didn't use street slang shows what white readers expect from black characters.

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Many recent, well-conducted studies have shown that university students, scientists, and managers penalize job applicants or professors who are thought to be female or black. By sending out identical résumés or offering identical online classes but changing the names to be male or female, stereotypically black (Lakisha) versus WASP (John) names cost professors over 20 percent in their approval ratings and cut job applicants' success rate in half. (*New York Times*, February 22, 2015). It does not beggar belief to think that publishers share these visceral reactions.

In 1986, in response to numerous complaints from women about our marginalized status in the crime fiction world, I started an organization that grew into Sisters in Crime. One of the first things Sisters did was a study of book reviews. We found that a crime novel by a man was seven times more likely to be reviewed than one by a woman, and that women's careers were derailed by this fact. Libraries, then and now, are the biggest buyers of new and midlist writers' work, and they

rely on prepublication reviews to make their buy decisions. If a whole group is missing, libraries don't buy the books. Careers languish.

Sisters developed several strategies to respond to the problem. We began to monitor review outlets and educate them on who was MIA. We compiled a “Books in Print” that went directly to libraries and bookstores. These strategies increased

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sales of women's mysteries, and inspired New York to increase the number of women writers on their lists. And slowly but surely, men who had shied away from books by women began reading them—if women were successful, they must be worth reading.

Thanks to our work, and to other social changes, the situation for women writers is better, but it is better for the most part for white, non-Latina writers. And even for white women, the situation is by no means halcyon. Women still struggle to get heard. The annual VIDA report, which shows the depressingly small number of women writers and reviewers featured in 20 leading publications, is only one measure of our continued marginalization. We are more likely to be punted into e-only publishing or to lose publishers altogether, to lose publicity dollars and speaking opportunities. For women writers of color, the situation is worse.

We need to go back to the drawing board, or drawing software, go back to good old-fashioned consciousness raising. A distressing piece of the Ferguson fallout is the police e-mail and text correspondence, heavily filled with noxious stereotypes. As FBI director James Comey said in his February 12 speech, we can ignore the realities of racial conflict in our society, or “we can choose to have an open and honest discussion about [what] our relationship [could be] if we took time to better understand one another.”

Popular fiction is a great place for opening minds—it's the softest of all pills to swallow. MWA can't solve the DOLLUS problem alone. We can't force publishers to look beyond gangbangers, “Baby Mamas,” and drugs in books with black characters, but we can help. We are establishing mentorship programs, where established writers will help aspiring writers navigate the publishing maze. We're looking at ways to use the web for helping members with publicity and ways to emulate Sisters in Crime by introducing writers directly to readers. MWA wants to advocate for all crime writers in today's harsh publishing climate, but we especially want writers who've been pushed completely off the margins to move back onto the page.

To paraphrase President Kennedy's inaugural address, this change won't happen in the life of my administration, but I hope to see it happen during my life on this planet. And at least, as JFK also said, we can let it begin.

SARA PARETSKY, author of the best-selling V. I. Warshawski series and a tireless advocate for books, reading, and libraries, last appeared in *Booklist* in our May 1, 2012, Mystery Showcase issue, with her essay, “The Written Word.” Her latest Warshawski novel, *Brush Back*, will be published by Putnam on July 28.

