

A Study Of Laurie R. King’s *The Mary Russell Series* As A Bildungsroman Of A Female Detective

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Abstract

From its inception, Detective Fiction had been largely a male-dominated genre of literature with both the protagonist and authors being male members of society. Women were portrayed mainly as side characters to further the narrative’s plot line. However, with time women writers also began to explore the genre and brought along with them potent female detectives as the protagonist. This paper strives to provide a brief analysis of the character of Mary Russell, who is shown since her formative years in the series by Laurie R. King, and how she attempts to establish Russell’s identity as a professional detective is shown in the form of a female bildungsroman.

Keywords: King’s *The Mary Russell Series*, gender, identity, literature, society, women protagonist

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1. Introduction

Detective fiction is broadly defined as a subgenre of Crime fiction, one that fictionalizes crimes, their detection, criminals, and their motives. But since its inception, it has been always a male-dominated genre, with women as insignificant side characters. It was only with the advent of women writers exploring the genre that they brought along with potent female detectives as the protagonist, however, this establishment of women characters as the central protagonist, and pursuit of the profession of a detective had seen the trials and tribulations of time. The author Laurie R. King through her novel series titled *The Mary Russell Series* features the female character Mary Russell as a detective, and this paper strives to study her growth and development as a detective to her final establishment as a successful detective, all along breaking the female stereotypes and debunking the myths associated with the out of the box professions, which are generally considered to be unsuitable for a woman.

Detective fiction in the Western world is said to have begun in 1841 with the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murder in the Rue Morgue" featuring the first ever fictional detective the eccentric and brilliant C. Auguste Dupin. Even though the origin of detective fiction is usually traced back to Biblical tales, however for most people detective fiction began and gained immense popularity with Victorian detective fiction, especially those featuring Sherlock Holmes. The earliest trends in detective fiction were the portrayal of a male detective as the central figure. These detectives even had a particular set of defined looks and appearances and a definite code of conduct and an air of gravity. Some insignificant female characters were merely scattered at places in the story to further the plot line. Those female characters were largely depicted as fragile, immature, and much lesser in intelligence to that of the men folk and there was a subtle indication that the women were not meant for this particularly adventurous profession. A definite plot formula was followed and suspense was mainly generated through multiple plot twists. The 'whodunit' mystery was the essential theme of the genre.

Some of the most famous fictional detectives were C. Auguste Dupin, the hero of Edgar Allan Poe's mystery series, Sherlock Holmes, the hero of Arthur Conan Doyle's novels and short stories, and Hercule Poirot of the Agatha Christie novels. These fictional detectives were portrayed as heroes and they gained extreme popularity and remained a staple of detective fiction over the ages.

Detective and crime-related stories are still considered as one of the most popular genres of fiction even in the current literary landscape and fictional detectives make a handy protagonist because they have the opportunity to explore milieus that are beyond the scope of the other characters. And with time women writers also emerged in this genre and started with new experimental techniques. Some of them even introduced the women detectives and presented them as the main protagonist. To name some of them, we have mystery series by women writers like *The Lord Peter Wimsey Series* by Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mary Russell Series* by Laurie R. King, *The Maisie Dobbs Series* written by Jacqueline Winspear, *The Professor Hilary Tamar Series* by Sarah Caudwell, to name a few.

2. King's female detective, Mary Russell: An Analysis

Laurie R. King (born 1952) is an American author best known for her detective fiction series titled "The Mary Russell Series ". King introduces a female detective named Mary Russell in this series of historical mysteries which comprises a considerable number of novels and short stories, written over nearly two decades in first-person narrative. Laurie R. King's novels are mainly portrayals of a succession of memoirs written and compiled by an aged Mary Russell.

Mary Judith Russell or better known as Mary Russell is portrayed as an aspiring female detective and a student of Theology at Oxford University. She makes her first public appearance in King's novel titled "The Beekeeper's Apprentice" published in 1994. This particular novel is set in early 1915 and begins with a fifteen-year-old Mary Russell, who runs into a middle-aged man, whom she soon realizes to be none other than Sherlock Holmes- the famous, consulting detective, the hero of Arthur Conan Doyle's mystery series, who resides at 221B Baker Street, known for his intelligence, intellectual ability, skillful use of observation, logical deduction, reasoning, and forensic skills. As the author herself says: "...even a novelist's fevered imagination has its limits, and mine would reach those limits long before it came up with the farfetched idea of Sherlock Holmes taking on a smart-mouthed, half -American, fifteen-year-old feminist sidekick " (King, 1994)

However, Sherlock Holmes introduced in this series by Laurie R. King is a middle-aged man, a retired detective, living in Sussex or South Downs where he cultures bees in his garden and is carrying out an experiment on the bees. Russell in no time impresses him with her power of deduction and soon they become friends eventually Holmes becomes the idiosyncratic mentor of Mary Russell and as time and circumstances befall the veteran detective himself takes up the task of training her informally. This training proves to be worth it and yields a positive outcome when Russell is caught up in an old enemy's vengeance against Holmes in the later part of the novel. Thus, the famous and celebrated detective Sherlock Holmes becomes a companion detective to Mary Russell and later they even get married to each other and continue to have a conjugal life apart from professional ties.

The first mystery that they solved together in "The Beekeeper's Apprentice" is that of Mrs. Barker, who suspected her husband, a retired government advisor to be a German spy and thought that the illness that he suffered from for few days and remained in complete isolation was a mere pretense. She had also consulted the doctors and even they could not find any specific reason for that particular illness which occurred to him only during the clear weather when it is easy to send telephone signals and thus her suspicion grew.

Russell embarked upon solving the mystery under the guidance of Holmes and found out that the actual criminal was the one least suspected. It was their servant Terrence Howell who was the actual traitor.

The next case that this novel speaks about is one in which Holmes was consulted on the kidnapping of Jessica Simpson, the American senator's daughter. Though Russell takes initiative but not to much avail, the culprits that they traced initially were merely hired and had nothing to do with the actual case as such. It was only much later after trepidation and strenuous task that it was finally found out that Donleavy, the daughter of Prof. M was the kidnapper. However, in both instances, it is indirectly hinted that Russell could solve the cases only with the aid of Holmes. Thus, Holmes takes an active part in solving both the mysteries, and Russell to some extent looms under his shadow.

From the very beginning the fifteen-year-old Mary Russell is shown as a young and independent girl providing accommodation to her aunt and also managing her own farm efficiently, as she says about her aunt staying with her: "Although she will control the finances for another six years, strictly speaking, she lives with me, not I with her" (King, 1994)

Mary Russell is also shown to be a student of Theology at Oxford University. She is intelligent and has a keen sense of observation. Holmes was impressed when she could tell the difference between the bees from a difference in the color of the spots on their wings. Then by merely observing the marks on the fingers of Holmes, she could tell that he was in touch with his violin and from a glance at the writing desk she could even tell that Holmes was writing a book on the perfection and unity of the bees. Russell is also depicted to be brave enough to take up the cases and also tries her best to solve them by her own reasoning and logical analysis and she is ultimately shown to have solved the cases too.

But Sherlock Holmes remains a very strong influence throughout the novel both as a mentor and as a husband. Holmes mainly solves the cases by not only providing some thoughtful insights but also by providing important clues to connect the missing dots and also, he appears in person in various scenarios. Russell thus time and often remains as the apprentice, merely assisting her husband. She is never shown to independently solve the cases. Sherlock Holmes is the main functioning brain behind solving the mystery and eventually, he takes the forefront. And this saga is continued throughout the series, which is written as Russell's memoir. Thus, in

this way, the aura and grandeur of Sherlock Holmes overshadow Mary Russell. And from this perspective, it becomes more of a Sherlock Holmes story than a Mary Russell Series.

Though Laurie R. King strives to clarify this and is quoted to have said, "I did not write Sherlock Holmes stories, I wrote Mary Russell stories." But it is Sherlock Holmes whose aura overshadows Mary Russell's time and often. These novels even featured Dr. Watson and Mrs. Hudson, the other two famous and widely popular characters of the original Sherlock Holmes mystery series which was written by Conan Doyle. This however may be Laurie R. King's tactics or marketing strategy to make her work a success because Sherlock Holmes was already a very well-established character as he was a tremendously popular fictional detective.

Thus, though King brings about a female protagonist, and introduces a female detective but she fails to provide the detective Mary Russell a complete individualistic identity of her own. She could not break free from the norms and societal cultures which condemn women from certain jobs, being a professional detective is one such. Though Russell has been portrayed as an intelligent, logical, brave, unconventional girl one who excels at even fighting, with an unflinching aim and takes up disguises in men's clothes, one who is independent-minded and yet emotional in spite of all these qualities attributed to her, she is put under the safe wings of Holmes. This may be a technique of King to make her work a success or maybe she was not sure of portraying a female detective solving cases all on her own but definitely, this whole endeavour deserves a special mention as it stands as a Bildungsroman, the character of Mary Russell, as the female detective is built and is carried forward as well and it was well received. As the feminist scholar Lillian Doherty calls "The Beekeeper's Apprentice "vivid and highly entertaining", (Doherty, 2001) saying her strong identification with the character of Mary Russell produced a temporary enhancement of her own sense of competence. Mary Russell is almost what Sherlock Holmes would have been if Holmes, the famous Victorian detective, were to be a Woman of the 20th century and interested in theology. It can be well deduced that if the mind is considered an engine free of gender discrimination and nurture considerations, then Russell and Holmes' stories are mainly about two people whose basic mental mechanism is identical.

Apart from that, King's Mary Russell - Sherlock Holmes series weaves a series rich in historical details, with intricate themes, intriguing characters, and enthralling suspense. But her novels merely reinforce the existing stereotype of the male counterpart being the actual hero. Russell is subdued by the aura of Holmes. Mary Russell becomes the colleague, confidant, and wife but remains the apprentice to Sherlock Holmes. A psychoanalytical interpretation of this phenomenon can be that since Sherlock Holmes is the husband, Russell dared not to overpower or overshadow him at any cost, but rather decided to remain as the deputy and work as the apprentice, given the deep-seated social norms to abide by the rules - that the husband is the superior one in the given relationship dynamics and thus to be followed. As Zorica Markovic states, "Marriage is a dynamic interrelationship of husband's and wife's unconscious motives, who repeat the pattern of family relationship they knew in their childhood" (Markovic, 1999).

She also states that in “most frequent models of neurotic marital relationships emotional needs of the partners are complementary in such a way that they create one psychic, closed circle full of tension which constantly repeats.” (Markovic, 1999, p.12)

Even according to Sigmund Freud, the choice of a marital partner as well as marital relationships are merely repetitions of relationships with parents' patterns from childhood. And also given that Russell is a woman and a detective, a profession that is considered to be unsuitable for her folk, subconsciously also she lacked the full confidence to stand on her own. And so even though Mary Russell tries to establish her own separate, independent identity, she remains under the wings of Sherlock Holmes' aura but on the other hand what is also to be noticed is that she continues to pursue her profession, simultaneously breaking many stereotypes and creating new grounds.

Thus, psychoanalysis also develops a theory of the unconscious mind, one that consists of the process in the mind which occur automatically, beyond our control, and are not available to introspection and include thought processes, memories, and motivations, it is a reservoir of feelings and urges. The earliest known definition of psychology is interlinked with the philosophical concept of the soul. Etymologically, the word “psychology” means the study of the soul, it is broadly derived from two Greek words namely “psyche” which means the soul, and “logos” which stands for a rational course of study and understanding. William McDougall, a British psychologist was the first to define psychology as the science of behavior in his book *Psychological Psychology* (1905) in which he states: “Psychology may be best and most comprehensively defined as the positive science of the conduct of living creatures” (McDougall 1905) And later he perfected it as: “Psychology is a science which aims to give us better understanding and control of the behavior of the organism as a whole” (McDougall, 1905, p. 43)

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, the unconscious mind influences one's behavior and conscious action. This links sexuality and subjectivity ineluctably together. In doing so, it discloses how our sense of self, and our localities and attachments are influenced by the unconscious drives and ordered by the symbolic structures that are beyond the preview of individual agency. It also poses questions to feminism about the values of difference and the quest for equality and the unresolved tensions between these pursuits.

3. Conclusion

Thus, in conclusion, it can be well said, that the author Laurie R. King through *The Mary Russell Series*, was successful in establishing her central character Mary Russell as a potent female detective, pursuing an out-of-the-box profession. King through her rich narrative style, also presents with a psychological insight into the mind and motives of the characters, thus adding to the appeal of the crime and detective fiction novels. The novel as a bildungsroman shows the formative years of Mary Russell and how she finally evolves into a mature woman, she is shown in the narrative to contend with rampant sexism and is often underestimated, excluded, and harassed but she is able to battle it all and solve the mysteries by her logical analysis, own zeal, and potentiality and thus she establishes an identity of her own.

About the author

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