‘Running seemed like a good option’: Gender, genre and the reluctant detective in Kate Atkinson’s crime fiction

Jackson Brodie, the (anti-) hero of Kate Atkinson’s crime novels, comes across as the antithesis of the traditional detective figure. Neither a master of ratiocination like Sherlock Holmes, nor the taciturn action-man of hard-boiled fiction’s mean streets, Brodie bumbles from one tragic-comic set piece to another, confused by a world he finds difficult to inhabit. Atkinson’s detective does not just challenge and experiment with the characteristics and masculinity of the traditional detective figure, her novels also push the narrative structure and standard themes of the crime fiction genre to its limits. This paper will explore the extent to which Atkinson’s Jackson Brodie series from *Case Histories* published in 2004 to her most recent volume *Big Sky* (2019) can be read as a post-modern engagement with the (male) detective and his typical traits. When child-care, marriage problems and a general sense of bewilderment have to be juggled alongside detective work, walking those mean streets becomes just that bit more complicated and unpredictable. Juxtaposing Brodie and the complex narratives in which he is embedded to more traditional and historical concepts of the detective in Anglo-American detective fiction, suggests that Atkinson’s experiments with this literary figure go hand in hand with a re-thinking of crime narratives’ spatial and temporal organisation. Furthermore, by inhabiting these new time/space configurations, the detective as a literary and cultural figure will become visible from a different perspective, in particular the ways in which it is linked to aspects of masculinity.

Masculinity and the detective

In her overview of the history of Anglo-American crime fiction, Sally R. Munt offers a poignant observation concerning the link between the detective figure's gender and narrative perspectivity. 'The reader's pleasure and admiration', she argues 'is directed uncritically at the hero who is always a unitary figure through whom all meaning in the text is distributed. Women, if appearing at all, do not act, they *react* to primary characters – men.'[1] The masculinity of Munt's unitary figure thus channels the readers' approaches to the genre and simultaneously is constructed in his gender identity via the attention he receives from the marginalised or, even absent feminine non-agents. Readers of traditional detective fiction will have encountered this figure in a wide range of texts, predominantly in the Holmesian model of the master ratiocinator or the battered action-man of hard-boiled fiction's mean streets.

As Joseph A. Kestner's [2] argues, Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional detective and his side-kick Watson can be understood as paradigms of *fin-de-siècle* masculinities: Watson's normative male behaviour and Holmes' superior logic and reasoning emerge as the two main gender traits that can guarantee the maintenance of order in a world of increasing uncertainty. Holmes' triumphs narrated by a hero-worshipping Watson reassure the reader that the values of the Western bourgeoisie will always prevail and not fall victim to confusion and doubt. As Judith Fathallah points out, 'constructions of proper white masculinity in which the character of Sherlock Holmes has historically partaken depend upon the triumph of rationalism as an order of knowledge and a logocentric regime of enunciation that renders everything readable, knowable, and master-able to the master detective.'[3] The role of the typical male detective and its underlying gender hierarchy is thus directly linked and contingent to maintaining a social and historical status quo that will not fall prey to changes und uncertainty. Deeply intertwined with this protectionist attitude towards dominant power structures is the homosocial bond that cements the relationship between Holmes and Watson and consequently, the tales' direct interest in the maintenance

[1] Munt, Sally R., *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge.1994), p. 4
[2] Kestner, Joseph, *Sherlock's Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle and Cultural History* (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing, 1997)
[3] Fathallah, Judith , 'Moriarty's Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC's Sherlock', Television & New Media, 2014,(1-11) p. 3

of hegemonic masculinity. Their relationship provides the narrative, thematic and logical framework of the stories and novels, putting the focus clearly on the relevance of power at the centre of male (heterosexual) bonding. This need of and desire for a man's world is further emphasised by the overall absence or at least maraginalization of female protagonists who in the majority of Conan Doyle's detective fiction mainly function as the necessary trigger ('damsel in distress') that puts the detective duo to action and thus further strengthens the bond between them. Their carefully negotiated homosocial relationship survives Watson's marriage (his wife conveniently dies which allows him to move back in with Holmes) and even Holmes' infatuation with Irene Adler in 'A Scandal in Bohemia' who is safely send off to America and into the nameless category 'The Woman' . As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out 'the status of women and the whole question of arrangements between genders is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women –even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships.'[4] It will be interesting to see how this triangular structure between the genders shifts once the detective figure is enmeshed into different models of masculinity and how it will affect the structural framework of the crime narrative.

While the private investigator of American hard-boiled fiction differs in many ways in values and appearance from the late 19th century master of ratiocination, they both share a focus on an idealized masculinity as a guarantor for a knowable world. In Raymond Chandler's famous description of his *noir* private eye, male identity becomes a key constituent part of his detective figure:

'But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.' [5]

[4] Sedgwick Kosofsky Eve, *Between men. English Literature and male Homoscial Desire*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 25

[5] Chandler, Raymond, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 18

It is no coincidence that Chandler's taciturn man is haunting (and haunted by) the mean streets of American cities battered by the Great Depression and the uncertainty it produced about the all-conquering narrative of the American Dream. However, shifting such semantic weight on the first person narrative voice has repercussions for the ways in which story and plot are balanced. Unlike Conan Doyle's case stories where the narrative is carried by the complex homosocial relationship between Watson and Doyle, a bond that serves to re-affirm patriarchal structure as well as narrative cohesion, the first person narrative voice in Chandler's novels shifts the main attention onto the *performance* of masculinity. Referring to Chandler's *Big Sleep*, Scott Christianson speaks of the 'hard-boiled conceit' [6] which functions as 'a linguistic assertion of power over experience'[7] and thus makes visible the performative gender matrix through which Chandler's private investigator Marlowe is produced as the narrative's protagonist. Marlowe's double-speak, the ways in which he speaks as a character in the narrative on the one hand and communicates this character self-referentially to the reader on the other, not only puts to the fore the detective as role player but furthermore, manliness itself. Paradoxically, Chandler's detective as 'man of honor' rather than firmly inhabiting the persona of 'the best man in the world', seems to prowl those mean streets in search of a masculinity that is not infected by the corruption and deceit he nobly aims to fight against, a desire that is never fulfilled and always ends in disappointment. In her psychoanalytical approach to Chandler's detective, Gill Plain argues convincingly that 'Marlowe is not the 'one good man' but is instead in search of that man.' Furthermore, his 'tough talk creates a verbal symbolic self that asserts the accepted form of patriarchal masculinity while obliterating all others, including its own vulnerable body.' [8] Her analysis of Chandler's protagonist who on first sight seems to present the perfect embodiment of his 'best man' and 'good enough man' shows convincingly that his hard-boiled conceits are nothing else but a verbal armour to withstand and control an environment in which his masculinity is always imagined as

[6] Christianson Scott R. , Tough Talks and Wisecracks: Language as Power in American Detective Fiction', Journal of Popular Culture 23 (Autumn 1988), pp 151-62; p. 156
[7] Ibid p. 153
[8] Plain, Gill, Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction. Gender sexuality and the Body (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.65

under attack. Marlowe's agency as private eye is enacted in a gritty, urban milieu on the verge of falling prey to corruption, fraud and deceit and thus privately as well as professionally in a perpetual state of emergency. While the double act of Watson and Holmes helps to reinforce a patriarchal structure that functions as a means to defend against imagined attacks, Chandler's detective and his model of masculinity must walk the mean streets lonely and solitary. Plain argues that Marlowe's masculinity is under a constant process of reconstitution 'through tough talk or an equally tough refusal to talk' and in addition has to assert 'his masculinity through the protection of the weak, both male and female, and through a sentimental, paternalistic romanticism that stands in stark contrast to the isolated existentialism of the tough guy persona.' [9] Furthermore, this vulnerable and fragile male body/embodiment of masculinity is always tested and under scrutiny in its encounter with women and femininity. The *femme fatale* is as much a staple of hard-boiled crime fiction as the detective himself and as a key constituent of the narrative, it is her task to demonstrate the abject danger of a certain type of femininity as well as the resilience of the masculine armour protecting the detective against it. In his ground breaking analysis of the relationship between fascism, masculinity and patriarchy *Male Fantasies*[10], Klaus Theweleit uses the term 'soldier male' for men who see women as an embodiment of their own anxieties about a disintegrating male body. Like the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled detective stories, this type of deviant femininity has to be annihilated symbolically as well as literally, since it might attack and fatally weaken the 'soldier male's' masculine identity. Masculinity itself is imagined as an ego armour where the protective surface has a double function: to keep what is inside safe and from being contaminated by the external other by fighting against the illusory onslaught of devious femininity; and secondly to keep his own soft inside/femininity hidden via unconscious repression. Thus, according to Theweleit for a man to be a man in a patriarchal society he requires physical and affective armament by growing a 'functioning and controlling body armour, and a body capable of seamless fusion into larger formations with armorlike properties. [T]he armour of these men may be seen as constituting their ego.' [11]

[9] Ibid. p. 60
[10] Theweleit, Klaus, *Male Fantasies Vol 2: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989)
[11] Ibid., p.164

Naturally, it is important to understand Theweleit's study of masculinity foremost as a critical scrutiny of the relationship between manliness and German (proto) fascism between the mid-1920s and 1930s and not all of his findings can be generalized. However, his exploration of masculinity in literary works, in particular the ways in which it took shape as an invincible warrior in an indestructible body shows parallels to the detective figure, especially in *noir*-type crime fiction. In addition to the fantasy of the invincible soldierly body, the splitting of femininity into non-threatening available women and dangerous erotically desired women discussed by Theweleit, constitutes another element that is often to be found in *noir* crime fiction. As Megan E. Abbot argues when analysing Philip Marlowe's masculinity: '…, if hard-boiled masculinity relies on the defeat of the femme fatale for its own existence, Marlowe's masculinity is structured rather as a house of cards, precariously built through a ritual transformation of the "feminine" into a contagion to be avoided. Marlowe's notion of masculinity utterly depends on hermeticism, on remaining free from this contagion.'[12]

While on the surface the soldierly male self of the hard-boiled detective figure suggests a masculinity that is strong and secure, his encounters with femininity demonstrate repeatedly that this fantasy can only be upheld and secured by social and emotional isolation from femininity. This gives further weight to Plain's argument that Marlowe rather than being this 'one good man' is actually 'looking for and desires this good man , …. He seeks exactly that which is prohibited by the laws of masculine self-fashioning: the excess of the body'[13] and it can only be found in and envisaged as a space outside traditional patriarchal and heteronormative confines. The idealisation of the homosocial goes hand in hand with a need to present femininity as either abject and dangerous, or as unattractive since it functions as a constant reminder of the 'good man's' emotional and erotic disappointment: the one he is allowed to desire according to patriarchal law is imagined as the reason for his own erotic melancholy and loss. Keeping his distance from women is essential for the figure of the *noir* detective: the aggressive *femme fatale* is dangerous because she threatens his sense of self and the available, traditional woman is of no interest, even detested, since she is seen as lacking erotic attraction.

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[12] Abbot, Megan E., "Nothing you can't fix": screening Marlowe's masculinity.' *Studies in the Novel Vol 25*, Issue 3, Fall 2003 pp 2-15, p. 4

[13] Plain, ibid., p. 65

Having looked closer at the significance of masculinities and their function in two mainstays of detective fiction, the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and Watson and the 'man of honor' in Raymond Chandler's *noir* fiction, it is evident that the detective figure itself is intrinsically intertwined with and responsible for specific constructs of masculinity. As mentioned above, Conan Doyle's stories present in the bond between Holmes and Watson an attempt to reassure a Victorian bourgeois and patriarchal society that became increasingly concerned about the viability and future of their own values and way of life. Dispassionate logic, rational thought and the reliance on a male companion not only enabled Holmes to face and contain threats from criminals and foreign powers, these elements furthermore served to fashion a new model of masculinity that could withstand the turbulences of change and challenges by whatever was perceived as 'other'. Holmes, with the help of Watson, is victorious against external threats attacking British society and, maybe even more crucially, can also fight off his inner dark demons and addiction to drugs. As Judith Fathalla points out: 'The model of masculinity the Holmes stories construct is rational, logical, courageous and patriotic—though not to emotional excess. It is scientific and dispassionate, privileging mind over body. It is, above all, incisive: able to see, to dissect by seeing, and to master situations and problems though an ordering, controlling gaze.'[14]

As much as initially Chandler's *Noir* Private Detective differs from the apparently robust model of masculinity presented by the Holmes/Watson duo and despite dissimilarities in historical, national and generic contexts, both concepts of the detective share similar characteristics in the ways in which they are interlinked with masculine identity. While Kestner points out that Doyle's narratives on a surface level give the illusion of a stable, monolithic and secure masculinity, he also demonstrates how the stories and novels' underlying discursive structural devices more often than not reveal themselves as a ''male spectacle' for Victorian culture.'[15]

This spectral dimension of masculine identity is even more noticeable in Chandler's tales told from the perspective of his 'man of honor.' Furthermore, because of the novels' setting in the precariousness of 1920s American urban capitalism and the central role of *femme fatale*-figures, the fragility of his male ego and the constant

[14] Fathallah, Judith, *Fanfiction and the Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 48
[15] Kestner, ibid.p. 14

battles necessary to maintain it, often emerge as the more urgent and real narrative of Chandler's writing. As Jopi Nyman argues, the detective of American hard-boiled fiction is embroiled in a power struggle precisely because his masculinity is always imagined as being under attack: 'Since hard-boiled fiction presents the masculine body as aiming at dominance, it also functions as a sign of the lack of the position. The constant emphasis on bodily power reveals that abstractions, generalizations, and ideologies can no longer provide an individual with meaning.' [16] His very virility is only ever under process which necessitates a constant alertness in order to fortify the discursive armour protecting his body so he is shielded from whatever emerges as his innermost desires and/or the external threat of femininity. As Nyman points out, the masculinity of the hard-boiled detective serves as a didactic and aspirational model since this type of fiction 'provides its readers with a reason to respect the male body and its power, it appears to mirror the threats felt by the men of the period about their social position and also, …, present a wish for clearly and hierarchically defined gender roles.' [17] It will be interesting to see how these aspects surrounding definitions of masculinity and the male body will impact on a detective figure that references a range of these anxieties but operates in a very different narrative, social and historical context.

The female Detective

While the core elements of narrative and character traits of the Holmesian and hard-boiled detective are still evident in more recent publications in crime fiction changes such as, the introduction of the female detective, different national setting, the move away from urban and metropolitan environment, have led to interesting modifications and transformations of the genre. While this article will not discuss the female detective and her impact on developments in crime fiction in detail, it will be helpful to provide a few comments on the ways in which gender politics are addressed with the introduction of a woman as the leading detective figure. P.D. James poignantly entitled novel *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* published in 1972, features a female detective/protagonist who is investigating a case in the milieu of 1970s Cambridge and thus seems to be worlds apart from the gritty hyper male detective of hard boiled

[16] Nyman, Jopi, 'Body/Language: Gender and Power in Hard-Boiled Fiction' *Irish Journal of American Studies,* Vol. 4 (1995), pp. 67-86, p. 81
[17] Ibid., p. 82

American fiction and the Holmes/Watson duo of *fin-de-siècle* London on the brink of modernity. However, the London office she shares with her partner is reminiscent of Doyle's Baker Street setting while Cordelia Gray, James' protagonist, displays in a subversive manner a range of the *noir*-detective's character traits: she has trust issues, has to carry out the investigation on her own and is nearly killed in the course of it. In this example of proto-feminist detective fiction, P.D. James forays tentatively into the gender politics of the genre by asking what happens to the narrative and detective figure when masculinity comes into play in a different manner.[18] While Gray lacks the cynical and wisecracking traits of Chandler's Marlowe and the emphasis on ratiocination of Doyle's detective, the investigation forces her to become more masculinised (there is a real moment of gender as performance/masquerade when she puts on the clothes and belt of the male victim) and, furthermore to confront patriarchal power structures as underlying concepts of fatherhood and motherhood, two central themes of the novel. To a certain extent, the relationship between gender identity and the detective figure is as central to James's novel as the 'whodunit' element. Maureen T. Reddy suggests to read James' novel as a bildungsroman fused with a detective narrative since

'the novel interweaves the story of Cordelia's development into an adult professional detective with the investigation she is hired to handle. Like the male hardboiled detectives, Cordelia is solitary and alienated from her surroundings; also like them, she repeatedly encounters resistance to her investigation and challenges to her authority. Unlike them, however, these conditions result directly from her gender, a fact that the novel's title underscores. … By the end of the novel, however, a more mature and confident Cordelia than the one we meet as the novel opens asserts her right to investigate and indeed to choose whatever work she wishes, relying in part on fantasies of her long-dead mother's approval.'[19]

Giving the detective figure a gender make-over elucidates even more convincingly that the traditional detective figure is intrinsically linked to, and battles with,

[18] Evidently, Cordelia Gray is not the first female detective as such. As pointed out earlier there are examples of Victorian crime fiction employing female detectives and the Golden Age era introduced a range of female detective figures such as Christie's Miss Marple. However, James' novel draws explicitly on specific traditions of hard-boiled fiction and, furthermore, has a professional PI as the main protagonist.

[19] Maureen T. Reddy, 'Women Detectives', in The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction, ed. By Martin Priestman (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp.191-208, p. 196

discourses surrounding masculinity with the effect that the female detective rather than appropriating the position of the detective, reveals further the many ways in which the detective figure is refracted through the complex relationships between gender and genre. This does not mean that narratives and plots led by female detectives are of lesser quality or 'don't work'. The 'awkwardness' of the female detective parodies the gender masquerade naturalised by the male detective figure or, as Munt puts it: 'The cross-dressed feminist heroine lays bare the artifice of gender via an investigation into patriarchal effects.' [20] As will be discussed later, this investigative element into gender hierarchies will also come into play in a male detective figure that inhabits a different social and narrative environment such as Jackson Brodie in Kate Atkinson's fiction.

Scandinavian gender melancholia

Appropriating agency and behaviour mapped on masculine structures in a parodic manner is a feature not exclusive to the figure of the female/feminist detective. Experiments with traditional masculine traits of the detective figure have also featured in more recent crime fiction with a male protagonist at the centre, particularly in the genre often referred to as Nordic Noir.[21] Detectives such as Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander, Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole from Norway, Åke Edwardson's Erik Winter, Arnaldur Indriðason's Icelandic Detective Erlendur, Matti Yrjänä Joensuu's Timo Harjunpää from Finland for example, have introduced crime fiction readers (and television/film audiences) to a new brand of male detectives who are all struggling with the social and cultural expectations of modern manhood. By means of setting a strong focus on social and political critique, Nordic crime fiction as early as in the 1960s has explored the genre in a distinctively different manner compared to British and American detective fiction. More recent publications have followed this direction which means Scandinavian crime fiction is often regarded as 'the vehicle for the urge to explore the relationship between crime and society in a

[20] Munt, p.206-7

[21] Scandinavian crime fiction is not the only genre where we can find these changes in relation to the male detective figure. From the late 1980s onwards a range of texts in British as well as European crime fiction has featured male detectives as displaying some kind of gender melancholia based on a grieving of a loss of (masculine) identity which then is developed as the special calling card of the detective. See for example Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus, Gerhard Selbst in the novels of Bernhard Schlink, or Robert Galbraith's Cormoran Strike. However, contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction and its film versions has become particularly well known for this type of detective figure.

modern welfare state. Consequently, a dominant approach to Scandinavian crime culture is social in its essence.'[22] While this article will not engage in depth with masculinity in relation to Nordic Noir, it is interesting to note that it contributed in an innovative and significant manner to the discussions surrounding masculinity in detective fiction. Henning Mankell's novels based on his protagonist Kurt Wallander, for example, not only reference issues of the modern welfare state, aspects of equality and, in addition the politics surrounding immigration and multiculturalism and increase of right wing and nationalistic discourses, they also offer a new take on agency and subjectivity in relation to the male detective. By setting most of the plot developments in the rural landscape and provincial cities of Sweden, Mankell's detective figure, while sharing character traits of the American *noir* detective such as, loneliness, being positioned as an outsider and complex relationships with women, lacks the urban savviness and nous of the traditional hard-boiled detective. However, both figures utilize melancholia and a sense of social distancing when it comes to pursuing crime and criminals although Wallander's 'dark thoughts' are often directly related to clinical depression and dysfunctional families. His problematic relationship with his father as well as his estrangement from his daughter are inextricably linked to his own sense of self as a man and as a detective-figure and provide an ontological framework in which the male detective is to be understood. While the environment of Chandler's detective's was defined by moral corruption, Marlowe was equipped with the mental and physical alacrity to challenge and fight social dysfunction which then served as a self-fashioning in relation to his masculinity. Wallander's fight against crime and the social ailments of Swedish society though are inextricably linked to his position as a (failing) son, father and lover and what could be described as his private life. As Anne Mullen and Emer O'Bairne argue, there is only ever the challenge but never the solution: 'The old patterns of reassurance, with the inevitable triumph of the intellect and restoration of a supposedly rational, ordered, and secure world, repeatedly give way in the face of a contemporary need to foreground the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of the self and society.[23] As a consequence, the sense of loss and anxiety about

[22] Agger, Gunhild., 'Emotion, gender and genre: Investigating The Killing.' *Northern Lights, 9,* 111-125. p. 113

[23] Mullen, A. and O'Beirne, E. (eds), 'Introduction' *Crime Scenes Detective Narratives in European Culture since 1944*, Amsterdam: Rodolphi,, 2000) p.2

certainty, the inability to find clear cut solutions are rooted in his complicated private life but then displayed through his gendered detective persona. Refracted through the dark and moody landscapes of a decidedly unglamorous Sweden that is riven by conflict and social discontent, Mankell's protagonist makes a clear comment on the ways in which the detective's masculinity is experienced as trauma and failure rather than an assured and secure position of subjectivity. These themes and issues will also come into play when discussing Kate Atkinson's detective Jackson Brodie.

Man on the run: Kate Atkinson's Jackson Brodie

The introduction of a female variation of the hard-boiled detective and the openly displayed melancholia and sense of loss in more recent crime fiction protagonists such as Kurt Wallander show that questions of gender, and how they are refracted through the detective's agency, are still relevant and crucial aspects in crime fiction. Aspects of both the Holmesian analytic detective and the *noir* genre's man of action are an ongoing concern in more recent detective figures however, in a world where the LGBQT movement has challenged so many aspects of 'straight' masculinity, they often are exhibited in a parodic or ironic manner. In addition, male detectives in contemporary crime fiction have also been influenced by developments in the psychological crime thriller, a sub-genre that is primarily interested in the psychological effect of crime on the criminal. This aspect of the genre 'diminishes, eliminates or pathologises the figure of the detective;' according to Greg Forster and, as he argues further on, these novels often explore 'how men might *embrace* the feminine threat to selfhood that the hardboiled form parries. … Their encounters with the feminine lead directly to their psychological dismantling. They are forced to acknowledge that the feminine criminality they try to externalise is internal to themselves, and the result is a destruction that takes the form either of literal death or of a psychotic rupture in which the female-criminal other is shown to inhabit the masculine self.[24] While many of the characteristics of those three detective types have left their mark on constructions of contemporary male detective figures, recent movements and debates in the area of gender and sexual politics have also lead to

[24] Greg Forster, 'Detective Fiction/Crime Novel' in ,*International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities* edited by Michael Flood, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Bob Pease, Keith Pringle (London: Routledge, 2007) p. 134

changes in the crimes fought by these investigators. Stieg Larson's bestseller *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was published in 2005 in Sweden under the original title *Män som hatar kvinnor*, literally meaning 'Men who hate women'. The novel not only introduced a new idiosyncratic feminist variation of the hard-boiled detective figure in Lisbeth Salander, it also indicated a change in the type of crimes that now caught the interest of the male detective such as Kate Atkinson's Jackson Brodie: misogynist violence aimed at women and the sexual abuse of children.

Jackson Brodie made his first appearance in Atkinson's *Case Histories* published in 2004 to great critical acclaim. While the novel is undoubtedly an example of crime/detective fiction, its narrative structure, focus on story-telling and equal interest in all of its characters sets it apart from more conventional products of the genre. Throughout, *Case Histories* keeps a tight grip on the self-referential attention to literary narratives as such, a strategy that also impacts on the role of its detective figure.

The book opens with three case histories set in the past (1970, 1994, 1979) which are then re-visited and re-told using the new information gained in the middle part. The title references the multiple meanings of the term case history: it is used in the context of crime cases but also refers to medicine and psychoanalysis, and thus forces the reader to engage critically with subjects such as guilt, innocence, serendipity, motivation, forgiveness and how to understand individual agency and self-knowledge. Most of Atkinson's fictional work questions notions of easy and clear-cut categorisation in general, and her interest in ambiguity and polyvalence is developed in relation to her characters' agency as well as to notions of genre. Her suspicion of grand narratives and curiosity about human nature and truth makes crime fiction and its various contexts a fertile ground for her inquisitiveness and sense of experimentation. As Glenda Norquay argues: 'Deploying comedy and tragedy with equal effect, Atkinson finds in crime fiction a genre that allows her to engage with agency and chance, justice and retribution, and to explore tensions between social institutions and individual imagination.' [25]

[25] Glenda Norquay. 'Kate Atkinson: Plotting to Be Read', in J. Acheson (Ed.), *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp, 119-128, p. 120

Her innovative take on crime fiction is also reflected in the exposition of her detective figure and the ways in which he is equally at the centre as well as on the margins of the novel. The reader encounters Brodie, who is on a surveillance job to gather photographic evidence for his client's wife's suspected adultery, for the first time in chapter four, after the first run-through of the three case histories: 'Jackson switched on the radio and listened to the reassuring voice of Jenni Murray on *Woman's Hour*.'[26] Not only is priority given to the narratives rather than the detective figure by introducing him relatively late into the book; by presenting him listening to a mild-mannered BBC radio programme aimed at a female audience, Atkinson's humorous and ironic take on the male detective figure is without doubt not lost on her readership. While the trope of the chain-smoking detective on a stakeout could be straight out of hard-boiled detective fiction, the tongue-in-cheek reference to the radio broadcast makes a convincing point that Brodie is no Philip Marlowe. His rather pathetic jealousy of his divorced wife's new partner, the fact that he often has to take his young daughter Marlee with him to work because he can't sort out childcare, and the often pitying remarks of female characters when it comes to his manliness, provide clear evidence that Brodie, as much as he desires to be a hard-boiled man/detective, does not quite make the cut. Even his secretary calls him ''too soft or too stupid''[27] to be in the detective business because he frequently feels unable to bill his clients for undertaken work. Paradoxically though, as we will see, this often means that Brodie's character is rather approximate to Chandler's concept of 'the man of honor' and by doing so shows clearly that notions of honour and truth are contingent on the social, narrative and historical contexts in which the detective operates.

Atkinson's Brodie is not the only contemporary detective which experiments with the complexities underlying the relationship between masculinity and the sleuth figure. As already mentioned, a range of novels as part of Scandinavian Noir is reluctant to follow the set patterns of traditional male detective figures and narratives often introduce new characteristics in relation to gender identity. At the centre of Camilla Läckberg's Fjällbacka novels (which are not strictly part of the Swedish Noir tradition) for example are a married couple – a writer and a policeman – and much of their

[26] Kate Atkinson, *Case Histories (London:* Black Swan, 2004) p. 69
[27] Ibid., p.164

interaction is defined by the complex relationship between the (gendered) domestic and public sphere. In most cases both of the protagonists contribute to the solution and much of the plot development is refracted through the questioning of gender specific behaviour and activities. With Cormoran Strike, Robert Galbraith's (aka J.K. Rowling) also tests the typical characteristics of the Chandler-like detective figure by presenting him as a vulnerable and damaged figure: he has a complicated relationship with his parents, has lost the lower half of his leg in an attack in Afghanistan, his romantic relationships are often dysfunctional or not viable and he dropped out of his degree at Oxford University. Paired with his vivacious and bright female sidekick Robin, the duo often investigates cases that are deeply intertwined with and the result of social power structures and their impact on people's physical and mental wellbeing. Andrea Camilleri's Salvo Montalbano also often negotiates his complex masculinity with his work and identity as a detective, a process that is often further complicated by adding the intricacies underlying questions of Italian/Sicilian national identity to the mix. These examples demonstrate that a range of contemporary crime fiction is involved with probing the characteristics of traditional detective figures and the ways in which they affect and are affected by gender identity. Atkinson's detective is unquestionably part of a more general interest in this type of experimentation with conventions however, what singles out her engagement with the male detective figure is the focus on Brodie's identity as an embodiment and effect of narrative forces.

The narrative structure of *Case Histories*, with its non-linear development of the story and episodic layout, has a direct and logical impact on the way in which Brodie works as a detective and interacts with his clients and other characters of the novel. Crime fiction often deploys elements of the quest-narrative in order to link the discovery of the criminal and the search for truth with a moment of self-renewal. Atkinson's Jackson Brodie series and the labyrinthine structure of its various volumes, puts particular emphasis on this aspect of the genre and is thus reminiscent of what Ernst Bloch refers to as 'investigative edification' in crime fiction: 'something is uncanny, that is how it begins. Investigative uncovering is indeed only one aspect, aimed at the origin. Investigative edification is the other, aimed at the destination. There, the finding of something that has been, here, the creation of

something new, this tense often no less labyrinthine process.'[28] In *Case Histories*, the characters, the detective and the process of truth finding are framed by cases which omit something (the initial presentation of the cases) and where something has been found (the re-telling of the cases towards the end of the novel). However, while conventional crime fiction is often very end-driven, Atkinson's stories are much more interested in the complex relationship between that initial omission and how it affects the events and human relationships that play out in the middle part. As Bloch puts it: 'And what was said at the beginning has been confirmed: there must be something to this case after all. The problem of the omitted beginning affects the entire detective genre, gives it its form: the form of a picture puzzle, the hidden part of which predates the picture and only gradually enters into.'[29]

This aspect of omission also gives from to the detective and his masculinity: something is lacking and the detective's agency and *raison d'etre*, his search for truth, is always also an attempt to locate himself in his respective historical and social contexts. However, as Atkinson demonstrates via her complex narrative structure and a detective whose professional behaviour is deeply intertwined with and reliant on his personal and private life, this quest will not necessarily be successful or result in a solution. Furthermore, compared to Holmes' tales of ratiocination and Marlowe's adventures of surviving the corrupted cities, Brodie rather than actively pursuing his cases becomes often inadvertently implicated in them and contributes to their solution as much and as little as the other characters of the novel. Indeed, many times it is only by accident, serendipity and coincidence that the initial omission can be identified and be substituted with a solution which is often only temporary in any case. As Glenda Norquay suggests: 'Atkinson's 'case histories' work in contradictory directions. On the one hand they suggest that violence is random, that chance makes people victims, damaged or lost; and on the other, that the patterns that emerge from violence suggest the possibility of 'balance' rather than justice.'[30] If chance becomes crime's central vehicle, detective fiction loses its end and plot driven direction because the reason for crime cannot be situated clearly in the intention of the criminal or a corrupted society. This ontological

[28] Ernst Bloch, Roswitha Mueller and Stephen Thaman , 'A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel'. *Discourse* , Summer, 1980, Vol. 2, MASS CULTURE ISSUE (Summer, 1980), pp. 32- 52, p. 50
[29] Ibid, p.51
[30] Norquay, ibid, 123

glitch will also affect the detective figure himself who rather than the source of agency will now function as a 'catalyst'[31] as Norquay puts it, he is manipulated by and comes into being as the effect of narrative strategies and as refracted through the actions of other characters. This sets Atkinson's detective figure clearly apart from its predecessors, in particular the analytical detective who provides closure and points the finger unequivocally at the guilty party. A character such as Chandler's Marlowe, because of his more complex complicity with and immersion in a corrupted society, is often unable to offer an unambiguous solution with the effect that the difference between detective and criminal emerges increasingly blurred and indistinct. With a figure such as Jackson Brodie, Atkinson's novels push even further into this direction and position the male detective in new discursive frameworks which will also leave their trace on the generic identity of crime fiction.

As mentioned earlier the sense of melancholic loss and omission play an important structural role in recent developments of detective fiction and the ways in which masculinity and gender identity comes into play in these texts. Atkinson's Brodie novels participate in these developments and are expressed in her idiosyncratic deployment of the detective figure and how he functions as a catalyst. While in *Case Histories* Brodie works as a private detective, he is not central to the events in the novel as such and is often overshadowed in significance by other characters most of whom are women. In an ironic twist, he is also employed by an elderly woman to find her lost cat which on the one hand ridicules the concept of the virile and macho detective thrown into dangerous situations by his investigations, but on the other, because the search for the cat will have a direct impact on the resolution of the first case, demonstrates that solving mysteries is more complex than purely linking cause to effect. The decision to work as a private investigator furthermore presents a change from Brodie's previous, much more traditionally masculine professions as soldier and policeman, both occupations that are often associated with 'action-man'-like stereotypes. His career change is deeply intertwined with his own ethical and moral position, since rather than focusing on punishment and a mythical restoration of law and order, Jackson sees his new job as a means to change the world for the better: 'Yet despite everything he'd seen and done, inside Jackson, there remained a belief – a small, battered and bruised belief – that his job was to help people be good

[31] Ibid, p. 121

rather than punish them for being bad.'[32] As Atkinson demonstrates clearly, this major change in the underlying motivation of the male detective whose main imperative is now constructive rather than based on punitive action, can neither be reconciled with a binary concept of masculinity nor the narrative conventions that have provided structural cohesion and congruence in traditional detective narratives.

New man/new stories

The notion of Brodie as a detective figure through which unfolding events are refracted means that as readers we are discouraged to imagine his agency as an outcome of conscious and rational decisions. Furthermore, his position as the narrative's protagonist, the hero who holds together and offers solution to its various strands, is not tenable anymore. Armelle Parey, argues convincingly that Brodie works on the margins of the stories and often has to step aside to make space for other characters and their role in and for the narrative:

'If Jackson Brodie is de facto the hero of the novels, if only because he is the only recurring protagonist, the narrative does not portray him as such, both in terms of his characteristics and also of his role in the narratives. Indeed, Atkinson's detective is rather ordinary in the sense that he does not have any particular gift or ability— …. He has hunches more than actual method and deduction technique.'[33]

In *One Good Turn* (2006), the sequel to *Case Histories*, Brodie does not even work as a detective anymore and his involvement in the plots and events is frequently pushed to the margins of the narrative. Furthermore, the pronounced episodic structure and the lack of a central 'crime' focus as well as departure from the 'who dunit' aspect by immediately revealing the identity of the murderer of one of the central characters, pushes to the fore parody and pastiche, as is already indicated by its subtitle 'A jolly murder mystery'. Like its predecessor, *One Good Turn* introduces Brodie fairly late to the events (chapter 4) and detaches him even further from the action: 'He was just an innocent bystander, after all.'[34] There are various references to crime fiction writing itself (Martin Canning, a main character, is an author of 'soft-

[32] Atkinson (2004), p. 79

[33] Parey, Armelle, ' Kate Atkinson's Crime Fiction: Exception as a Rule ', *Études britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne], 58 | 2020, accessed: 27 September 2020; http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/8351 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.8351

[34] Atkinson, Kate, *One Good Turn* (London: Black Sawn, 2006), p. 65

boiled' crime novels'[35]) and in a parodic twist, Brodie becomes a murder suspect himself. While the underlying structure of *Case Histories* already puts emphasis on a de-centred layout by connecting the various narratives in a rather loose manner, *One Good Turn* accentuates this even further by using a box structure reminiscent of Russian Matryoshka dolls (which also feature in the novel at various stages). For Stefania Ciocia these thematic and formal self-referential ploys are clearly indicative of a postmodern take on crime fiction since 'the deliberate confusion of the roles of the investigator, the criminal and the victim, and the inconclusiveness of the absence of a solution'[36] result in a subversion of conventional detective fiction.

Following the development of Brodie as a detective figure leaves no doubt about the long-lasting and seismic effect these structural and thematic shifts have on the presentation and role of gender in Atkinson series. Rather than central and in control of events and the unfolding action, Brodie is established increasingly in the role of 'a voyeur, the outsider looking in[37] and thus removed from the decisive and virile persona of traditional male detective figures. His professional life is always deeply intertwined with his private situation and all his decisions are influenced by and have an effect on his identity as a father, ex-husband and lover. Similarly, the repeated references to the unsolved murder of his sister Niamh in the past emphasise an element of deep trauma as a major aspect of his identity as man as well as detective. He is haunted not only by the mysteries surrounding Niamh's brutal murder, violated women and abused children often turn out to be at the centre of his cases, even if he (and the reader) is oblivious of it at the beginning of the investigation. When he discovers in *Case Histories* Olivia was (accidentally) killed by her sister Sylvia because she wanted to protect her from their father's sexual abuse, Brodie sees Sylvia's deed as an act intended by love and exonerates her from her guilt which for him is clearly to be apportioned to the father.

[35] Ibid., p.24

[36] Ciocia, Stefania, 'Rules are Meant to be Broken: Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Crime Writing', ed. Christine Berberich, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) pp.108–28; p. 116

[37] Atkinson, *Case Histories*, ibid., p. 79

The violation and abuse of women and children by men runs like a read thread through the series and is the theme through which Brodie is refracted as a man and which gives sense and meaning to his various cases. In *When Will There Be Good News* (200) Brodie's position as a bystander and onlooker becomes untenable and irreconcilable with his moral and ethical standards and manifests itself in the active destruction of a crime scene in order to protect a woman who killed her male kidnappers. *Started Early, Took My Dog* (2010) once more focuses on sexual violence against women by going back to the Yorkshire Ripper cases in 1970s Leeds and in addition asks the reader to reflect on the meaning of motherhood and motherlove when juxtaposing biological parenthood to a kidnapping motivated by care and concern for a child. The most recent contribution to the series, *Big Sky* (2019), engages with the trafficking of young women from Eastern Europe and yet again, Brodie becomes complicit with the victims, helps them to flee the crime scene and subsequently lies to the police when reporting the crime. In virtually all of the series' books we see Brodie re-writing the rules of the detective by defining the man of honour as somebody who not only sides with but directly supports the victims of crimes in their fight against male perpetrators. Furthermore, even though the theme of the avenging woman is never presented as unproblematic, Brodie's choices and his sense of justice are aligned with increasingly empowered women who take the law into their own hands. The series as a whole maps this development directly onto gender identity where the past is imagined as 'a dark place, a man's world'[38] , whereas we see Brodie becoming progressively feminized as his former lover Julia states: ''The older you get, the more like a woman you become''.[39]

The significance of time, the complex relationship between past and present and chronological structure of narratives are crucial elements and building stones in crime fiction and by putting these aspects to the fore, Atkinson's Jackson Brodie novels creatively and self-consciously engage with the genre and one of its central protagonists, the male detective. Tzetvan Todorov's seminal work on detective fiction, famously theorizes crime narratives as defined by two stories where 'one… is

[38] Atkinson, Kate, *Started Early, Took My Dog* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2010) p. 329

[39] Ibid., p. 50

absent but real, the other present but insignificant'[40] and traditionally it is the detective's investigation through which the two narratives and time spheres are brought together. This ability to connect and 'make sense' is often presented as resulting from rational thought processes and/or the brave battles in the urban jungle, both characteristics and accomplishments associated with the male detective. In Jackson Brodie, we are confronted with a detective who steps out of line and attempts to depart from this model of 'male time'. He is as much a father, brother, son, ex-husband and lover as a detective and both his professional and private persona inform his approach and investigation of crime cases. In addition when 'the intersections of women's lives and criminality become an increasing focus of attention in the series'[41] as Glenda Norquay suggests, Brodie's active control of events appears to be waningt and he increasingly hands over the reins to the various women and children in his private and professional life. This coincides with narratives in which the relationship between past and present becomes progressively complex and interdependent, with the effect that Todorov's two stories cannot be connected any longer by the detective figure. A constant moving forward and backward in time, disturbances of synchronicity and a questioning of reality as defined by a reliable chronology not only demand new approaches to the investigation of his cases, they also force Brodie to re-configure his own masculinity and the ways in which it is related to his identity as a detective. For Armelle Parey this is also expressed in the significance of chance – the lack of cause and effect – and for her 'Atkinson has created her own genre of crime fiction that constitutes an exception in the genre because of the individualisation of characters, not limited to that of the detective figure, and a strong dose of self-consciousness.'[42] In her hands the traditional end-driven plot, narrative coherence and satisfactory explanation, usually guaranteed by the detective, turn into a jigsaw in which the various pieces are constantly in play and thus re-constitute the frameworks underlying the genre as well as the detective.

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[40] Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." *The Poetics of Prose*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Cornell University Press, 1977. 42-52. P. 46

[41] Norquay, ibid., p. 122

[42] Armelle Parey, « Kate Atkinson's Crime Fiction: Exception as a Rule », *Études britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne], 58 | 2020, mis en ligne le 01 mars 2020, consulté le 08 octobre 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/8351 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.8351

Conclusion

The most recent instalment of the Jackson Brodie series emphasizes the sense of departure from tradition and convention by starting the narrative with a departure. His now grown-up pregnant daughter Marlee has left her husband-to-be at the altar and with the help and support of her father, she escapes the traditional life and story line of women. In *Big Sky* Brodie is just a character amongst others and there is a sense of *déjà vu* when he gathers proof of an unfaithful spouse, but this time his client is the wife and not the husband as in *Case Histories*. Furthermore, most of the narrative revolves around his complicated relationship with his teenage son and ex-partner Julia and the novel itself is framed by his road adventure with his daughter. Yet again, it is only by chance and serendipity that he stumbles across the real crime, a sinister network of men who are trafficking young women from former Eastern Block countries, but in the end it is the victims who with the help of Reggie (who first featured in *When Will There Be Good News?* and now a police woman), are able to save themselves. His decision to give false witness and manipulate the crime scene demonstrate that he sees his role as a detective in a re-balancing of justice which for too long has been on the side of misogynists and male sexual violence. In this latest contribution to the Jackson Brodie series, the male detective as he is traditionally known has been made redundant since it is the women and children themselves who can figure their own way out of difficult and dangerous situations. Brodie's identity is linked in an even closer manner to fatherhood and it is there where he comes into being as a character. His agency as a detective is negligible and any involvement in the cases is accidental and only in a supportive role. The urban hunting ground has been replaced by a run-down sea-side town, emphasizing the atmosphere of melancholia and nostalgia. As has become increasingly evident in the previous Brodie novels, these are tales that are ensemble pieces which can't accommodate a conventional detective figure who can link together the various narrative strings. In *Big Sky*, society and the crimes it spawns is defined by a haphazard nature and its dark side is shown as inextricably interlinked with any notions of normality and law and order. This includes too traditional constructions of masculinity as displayed by detective figures and the ways in which they interact with and define themselves against femininity, these are no novels for old-fashioned men.

In Atkinson's Jackson Brodie series, the self-conscious experiments with narrative time and structure not only push crime fiction and detective fiction to its limits, by doing so the novels also pave the way for a male detective who needs neither a *femme fatale* nor a damsel in distress to negotiate his sense of masculinity. As Brodie says himself: 'The past counted for nothing, … Only the present had value.'[43]

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[43] Atkinson, Kate, *Big Sky* (London, Transworld Publishers, 2019), p. 1

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