

**Sisters in Crime at the Quarter Century: Advocacy, Community, and Change**  
Barbara Fister

**A paper presented at the International Popular Culture Association Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas, April 23, 2011**

Abstract: When Sara Paretsky spoke about misogyny in the mystery at a conference at Hunter College in 1986, her words set off a wave of interest in forming a professional organization that could advocate for equity for women crime fiction writers. As an organization that embraces both published and aspiring writers as well as others interested in the genre, Sisters in Crime provides a unique vantage point for observing developments in crime fiction, in the publishing industry, and in the ways that women participate in it. This presentation will examine women's changing role in crime fiction through the lens of a unique community, will analyze data from more than two decades of its book review monitoring project, will discuss results of a major study of mystery readers, and will examine how the organization currently balances advocacy, professional development, and community building among women in the genre. Implicit in the organization are two sometimes competing goals: criticism of patriarchy both as it presents itself in the genre and in the publishing industry and a desire to accommodate cultural institutions in order to promote women's success.

[Sisters in Crime](#), founded 25 years ago to promote equity for women in crime fiction, offers an interesting vantage point for observing developments in the mystery genre and in the publishing industry, as well as a lens for observing women's role in both. The organization grew out of two catalysts: in 1986, the first conference on women in the mystery was organized by B.J. Rahn at Hunter College. As a speaker on a panel at the conference, Sara Paretsky gave an impassioned speech about the increasingly sadistic violence against women being portrayed in popular literature. (The serial killer was a fairly new stock antagonist at the time, and women were typically the victims being serially and gruesomely slain.) That same year, Phyllis Whitney wrote a letter to the Mystery Writers of America protesting the bias against women demonstrated by the fact that only seven women had been awarded a best novel Edgar in 41 years. This widely-circulated letter contributed urgency to Paretsky's spirited call to action. Paretsky invited women to gather together for networking and support—and so Sisters in Crime was born.

In a sense, these two precipitating events predicted an interesting feature of the organization that persists today. Phyllis Whitney and Sara Paretsky write in very different styles. Whitney's writing career spanned more than half a century, adapting the Gothic romance to a twentieth century audience, retaining a traditional formula while saying in an interview in the 1970s that her characters were "women's-libbers" because they were able to solve their own problems (qtd. in [Reed](#)), a thoroughly second-wave feminist perspective focused on promoting women's ability to succeed in a man's world.

Paretsky was among the women who reinvented the hardboiled and socially progressive private eye story in a feminist mode, one that [Laura Ng](#) finds rooted in proletarian literature of the 1930s. Thus her work belongs to the third wave of feminism, in which the focus is on power relationships, race, class, and gender. Though these women's fictions seem to spring from very different literary roots, it's clear that from the very start Sisters in Crime has embraced the entire spectrum of crime fiction, from light to dark, showing respect for the diversity of women's creativity and tastes.

Sisters in Crime set out to be a different kind of organization than others serving writers in the genre. It was founded as an organization that didn't require publishing credentials to join, one that was as open to readers and to aspiring writers as to established ones, one that promoted women through offering opportunities for networking, research, and professional development. Examining the very first newsletters of the organization [archived at Rutgers University](#) shows that though the membership has grown from under 100 to over 3,000 and the current publication looks more polished, the first newsletters covered similar ground as do the current issues of *InSinc Quarterly* available to members at the organization's website, a mix of member news, chapter events, professional guidance for writers, and commentary on issues of the day. Sisters in Crime has also had an ongoing research program. In the early days the organization collaborated with a scholar to examine images of women in crime fiction, an analysis begun by volunteers in Chicago but which does not appear to have ever been completed and published. Today the research program includes annual "publishing summits" reporting on trends in the industry<sup>1</sup> as well as a significant [market research study](#) commissioned in 2010 on the mystery consumer.

The 2010 survey provides an interesting snapshot of the mystery market just as it is poised on the brink of digital change. Bowker was hired to conduct the study, using book sales data they compile as the publishers of *Books in Print*, and survey results gathered from a representative sample of over 1,000 readers who were screened by being asked if they had purchased a mystery in 2009 or 2010. The results suggest that mystery buyers are overwhelmingly female and older (with 70% being women over 45).<sup>2</sup> Just over half said they were frequent mystery readers and nearly 40% said they were almost

---

<sup>1</sup> Reports from these summits are available to members at the Sisters in Crime website. They include two reports focused on interviews conducted with agents, editors, and publishers in New York, one focused on book distribution processes, including wholesalers and distributors in the Midwest, and one focused on the e-book revolution involving visits to Smashwords, Amazon, and Google on the West coast. A forthcoming summit report will focus on how readers discover books drawing on interviews with publicists, researchers, and librarians.

<sup>2</sup> These numbers may be somewhat misleading in that Bowker treats mysteries and thrillers as distinctive categories, a line between genres less clearly drawn by readers and by the publishing industry. It's interesting to note that the survey found older readers more inclined to see mysteries as a distinct category much more often than younger readers do. Had the survey recruited participants by asking if they had purchased a mystery or *thriller* within the past two years, the findings might have been significantly different.

always reading a mystery—in other words, a large percentage of mystery buyers are avid readers of mysteries. Younger respondents reported being more interested in edgier, darker books than the older readers did. That a gender bias remains is demonstrated by the fact that 25% of male respondents said they preferred to read books by men while only 6% of women said they tend to choose books by women.

In January 2011 I distributed an online survey to members of Sisters in Crime which garnered 788 responses. Not surprisingly, 90% of the respondents were women. More startlingly, 70% were over age 55. The most commonly chosen reason for membership (see figure 1) was “to be part of a community devoted to the mystery genre” (89%) with the second most common reason being “to support equality for women crime writers” (61%). Clearly, interest in the genre is edging out women’s equality as a motivator among members.

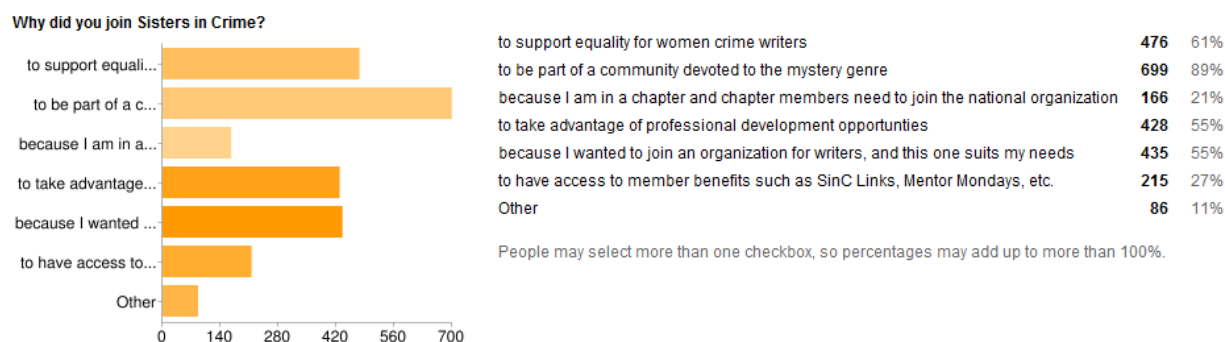


Figure 1

That said, though most respondents believed progress has been made toward equality for women writers, only 6% felt enough progress had been made that it no longer needed to be the organization’s mission (see figure 2).

The survey invited members to offer suggestions for the organization. Twenty of the suggestions dealt specifically with the feminist mission of the organization, with five members (two of them male) saying it was no longer needed and fifteen volunteering the opinion that it should be emphasized. This suggests a certain level of conflict between the organization’s mission to advance the commercial success of members in a competitive publishing climate and its mission to promote equity for women in the industry. As one member, a male aged 45-54, wrote, “Stop harping on the equality thing—it’s so yesterday—and focus on issues of real value to mystery writers, like promotion, writing to sell, the

current market, and so on.” A woman (also aged 45-54) wrote “scale down on the propaganda that women mystery writers are oppressed and discriminated against and put more emphasis on the quality of output.”

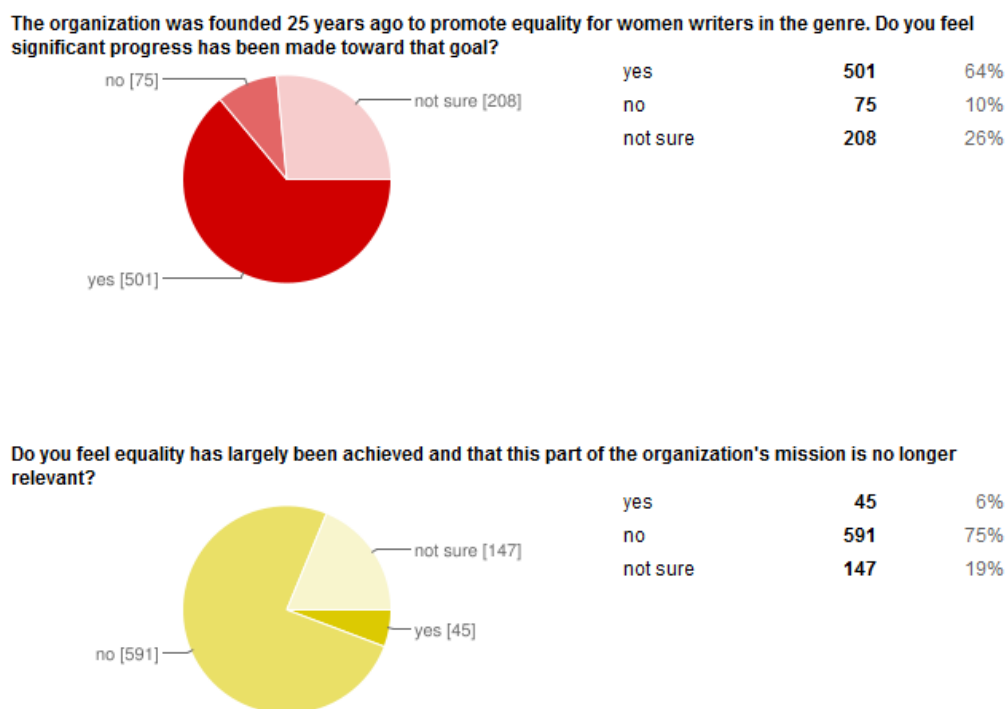


Figure 2

That attitude, however, was outnumbered three to one by responses urging a greater focus on equality for women, with several mentioning old sore spots: a lack of women represented in Edgar awards and a disproportionate amount of critical attention paid to male writers. One respondent urged, “promote equality for women writers in the genre” (female, 65 or older) while another wrote, “do not give up your role in championing women in writing in the mystery genre. Clearly it is still needed” (female, 55-64). “I think SinC has really amped up its presence in the mystery and publishing world in the last few years,” one respondent commented, “and I want to see that continue. I'd also love to see more advocacy with publishers on issues affecting writers, particularly women—reviews, advances, rights, etc.” (female, 45-54). Interestingly, all of these causes were brought up in the first meetings of the organization.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> In the [Sara Paretsky manuscript collection](#) at the Newberry Library in Chicago there are memos written by Sara Paretsky dated June 1987 in which these very strategies for advancing women’s equality are raised.

tension between advocacy for women writers as a class and for individual members' success was noted in one suggestion: "newer members be made aware of the basic mission of the organization and not see us as just another tool for individual self-promotion. They really don't get it and I find it extremely offensive" (female, 55-64). A particularly pithy respondent observed "over the past few years it seems more and more men are joining. Why? it sometimes feels like Sisters in Crime is becoming more of a People in Crime, that we're losing our focus, our mission, our desperately needed push for female mystery writers. There are lots of orgs for men to join to further their writing career. I wish SinC would 'woman up'" (female, 45-54).

A more subtle source of conflict within the organization has to do with what it means today to be published. In 2008, the organization went through the kind of conflict that was playing out in many genre fiction organizations, including fan conferences and awards, as people tried to draw a line between writers who had gone through the traditional publishing channels and those who were either self-published or were being published by one of the digital or micro-publishers sprouting up as new technologies lowered the cost of entry to the industry. Being published was typically defined in terms of print runs, advances, retailer discounts, and returnability, all standard features of traditionally published books. Controversy erupted when the board proposed ending a long-standing practice of publishing a printed list of books published by members, suggesting that the cost had grown prohibitive and the primary intended audience—booksellers and librarians—no longer found the list useful. A proposal to create a separate list of traditionally published books by members turned out to be an uncomfortable fit with the egalitarian culture of the organization. Though some members fretted that those who self-published were being misled by companies that preyed on aspiring writers, arguing that the organization had a duty to encourage members to follow a presumably more rewarding path to publication, the board ultimately decided to move the list online, replacing the printed list with a Worldcat-based search engine and a comprehensive list of member-author websites. Though comments in the survey indicate the status issues involved in self- versus traditional publication remain a sore point with some members, the decision of the organization to abandon the short-lived idea of defining "legitimate" publication using industry norms now seems prescient. In 2011, the definition of "published" is more fluid than ever. The fact that a young, female self-published author earned a [multimillion dollar](#) deal from Macmillan just as another Macmillan author [turned down](#) a \$500,000 two-book contract in favor of self-publishing has recently ignited discussions that turned the 2008 controversy on its head: now writers are questioning whether traditional publishers are preying on aspiring writers. As an indication that the organization continues to support the professional development of its members with state-of-the-art





combinations of elements, categories not included in the list such as young adult, short fiction, and scriptwriting, as well as non-mystery publications. Traditional and historical categories were followed by thrillers, mysteries with supernatural elements, and romantic suspense. Police procedural and private investigator mysteries were relatively few (figure 5).

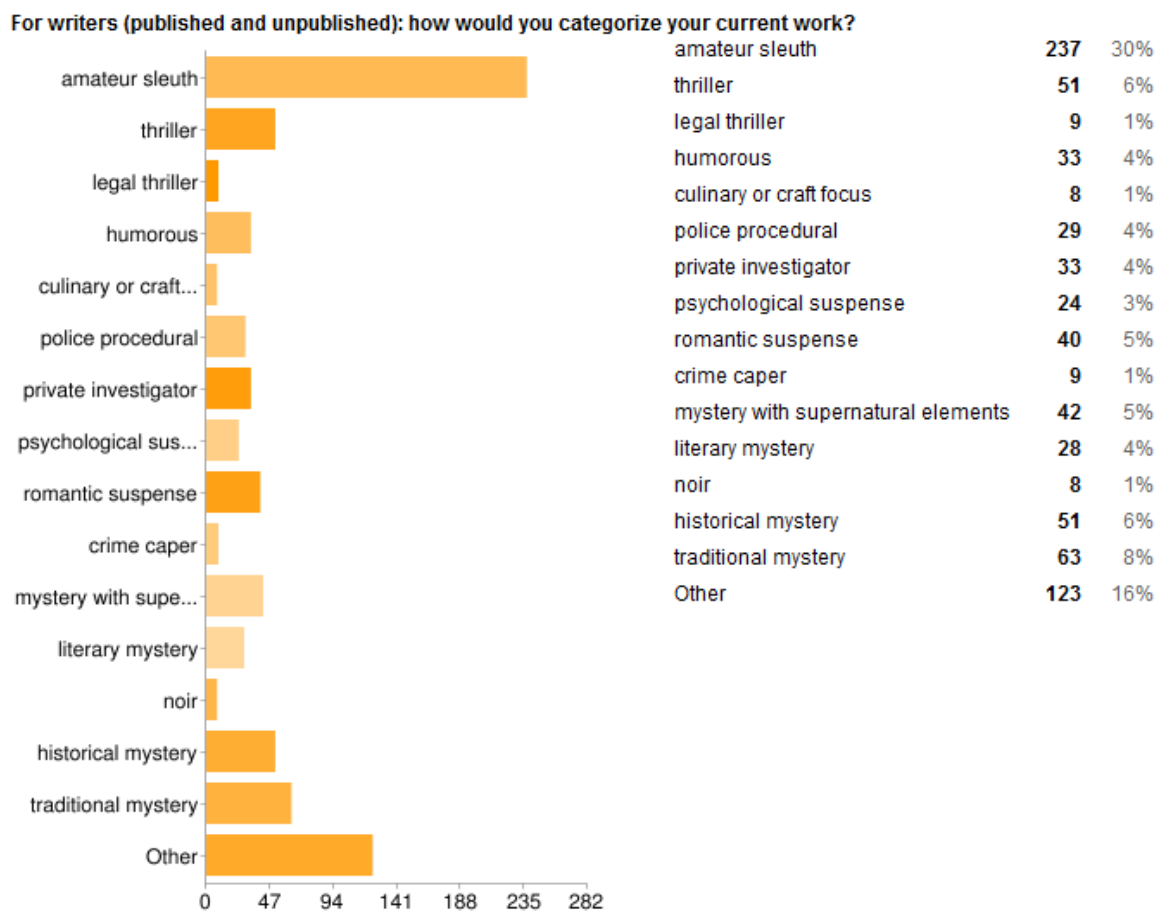


Figure 5

Interestingly, when asked where reading preferences fell on a spectrum from light to dark, members' tastes tended toward the middle (figure 6), with 36% of readers saying they prefer "medium-boiled" stories in which "a certain amount of violence is to be expected, but the overall tone is positive."



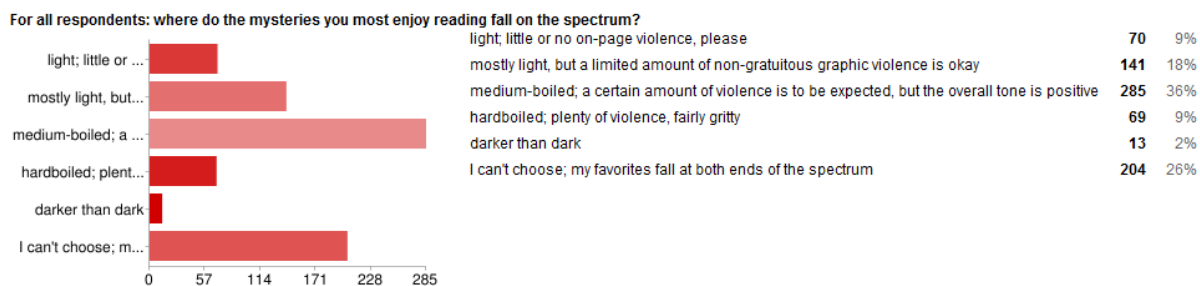


Figure 6

Another 26% selected “I can’t choose; my favorites fall at both ends of the spectrum.” That said, the percentage of readers who generally prefer light books is higher than those who most enjoy dark and hardboiled books.

The results of this survey of members of Sisters in Crime suggest questions that could be explored in further research. Given the age of the membership, do younger female mystery writers feel less need for formal organizations because online social networks provide the networking opportunities previously only available through more formal associations? Or do younger female writers feel equally-talented male and female writers have an equal shot at success? Might they feel that joining an organization for women might actually hinder their success? If this is the case, is Sisters in Crime missing an opportunity for advocacy and education?

An examination of the ongoing Monitoring Project suggests that advocacy is still needed. As the organization formed, one of the founding members, Sandra Scoppettone, observed that the mystery columnist for the *New York Times Book Review* hadn’t reviewed a book by a woman for months. The first newsletter published results of a “book review project” that found that over the years 1985–1987 the percentage of women getting reviews in the *New York Times Book Review* had fallen from 15% to 6%. The group sent a letter of protest to the *Times*. Though the letter was never acknowledged, the percentage of women’s mysteries reviewed in 1988 rose to 23%. Out of this early concern that review outlets were skewed against women writers—and that perhaps media could be persuaded to change—the Monitoring Project was formed. Members volunteered to tally reviews in a variety of media throughout the United States.

The recent news from this project is not entirely encouraging. We know the majority of mystery readers are women. We don’t know for sure what percentage of published mysteries are by women, though a couple of indicators based on a bookseller’s count of new publications in a recent year and an informal estimate based on books submitted by publishers for Edgar awards suggests that it is around

50%.<sup>4</sup> When all of the review publications followed by the monitoring project are combined, books by women authors reached a respectable 44% of books reviewed in 2005 and 2006. However, that total includes publications such as *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* which review a much wider range and number of books than any other publications, and *Romantic Times* which overwhelmingly features reviews of books by women. The percentages are much lower in the most prestigious news outlets being tracked in recent years, and the percentages vary greatly from year to year (figure 7). For example, only once in the years 2005-2009 has the *Los Angeles Times* reviewed a higher percentage of women authors than they did in 1989 (figure 8). Overall percentages have fallen off in recent years (figure 9). In some respects, this may seem nearly irrelevant, as the number of book reviews published in news outlets has plummeted. Yet it's worth noting that as review space shrinks in the mainstream media, women authors are losing more ground than men.<sup>5</sup>

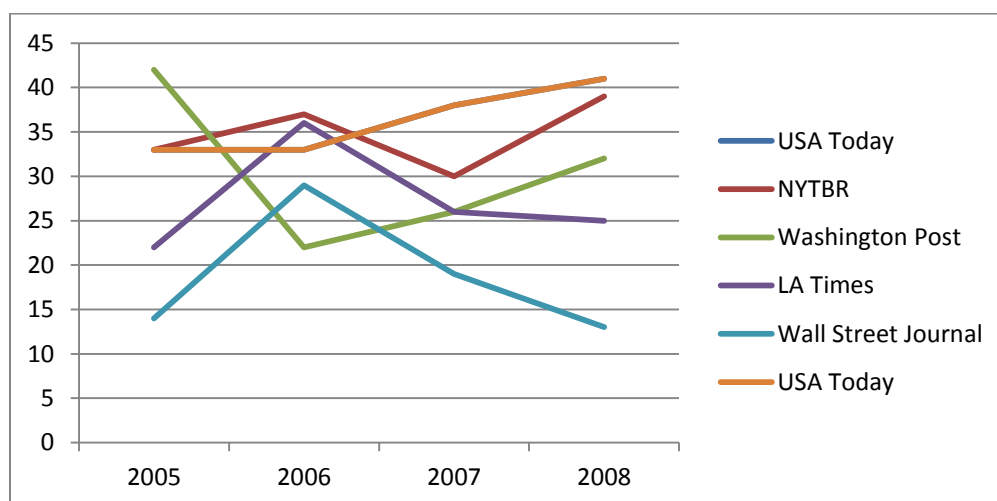


Figure 6: Percentage of Reviews of Books by Women, 2005-2008

<sup>4</sup> These estimates come from bookseller Jim Huang and author and current president Cathy Pickens in informal board conversations. This figure is much higher than a percentage mentioned in a letter archived at Rutgers University from Sara Paretsky dated June 1987 to the membership pressed the organization to examine book reviews, stating that in 1985 38% of "all mystery and suspense novels were published by women." There is no source cited for that figure. If these figures are accurate, the good news is that the percentage of women being published is increasing; the troubling news is that this increase is not met by a proportionate increase in reviews.

<sup>5</sup> In conversation, women have pointed out to me that many lighter mysteries are unlikely to be reviewed because they are intended as entertainment and are thus predictable and stylistically unadventurous. This fails to account for the frequency with which James Patterson novels are reviewed, though they are nothing if not predictable entertainment with little attention paid to literary aesthetics.

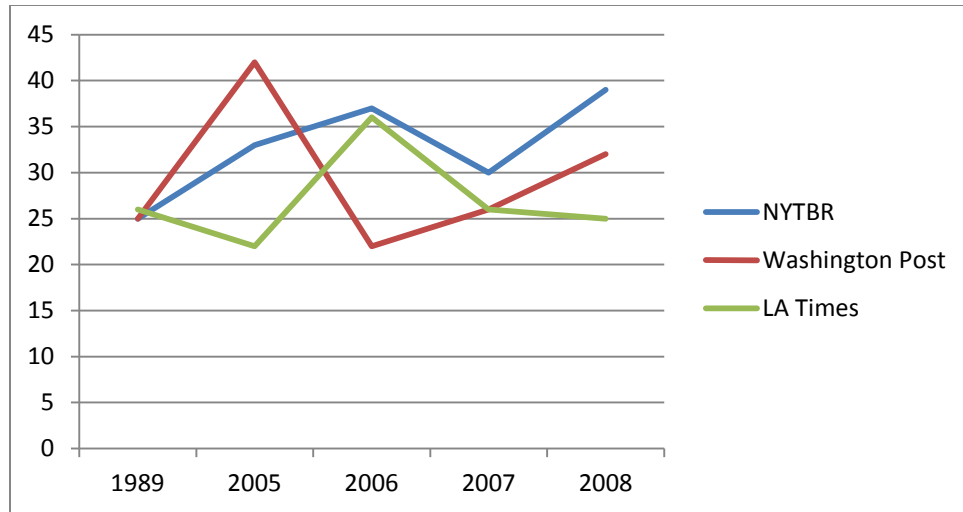


Figure 7: Percentages of Reviews of Books by Women in Selected Publications, 1989 and 2005-2008

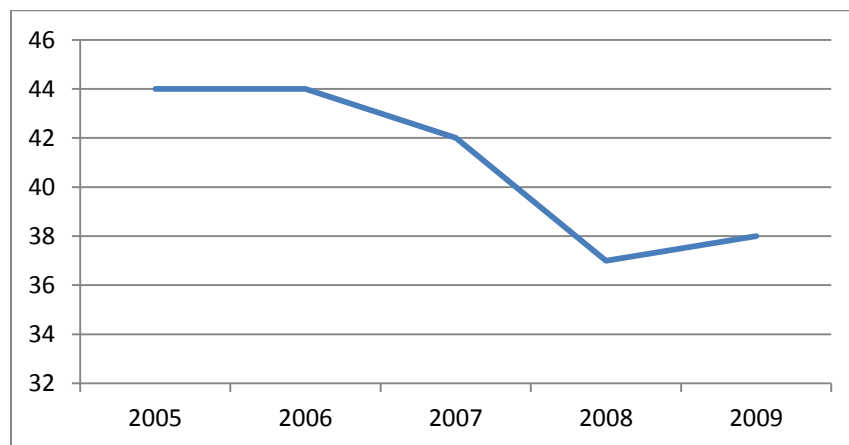


Figure 9: Combined Percentages of Reviews of Books by Women for All Review Media Monitored, 2005-2009

When we assess the current status of the two issues that served as catalysts for the organization, it's clear that the mission of the organization remains relevant. Only seven women have won the Edgar award for best novel since Phyllis Whitney raised the issue in 1986, and in recent years the percentage of women winning has slipped. Since S.J. Rozan won the award in 2003, as of this writing all of the winners have been men. Meanwhile, it would be hard to believe there has been any decrease in misogynistic depictions of violence against women in the genre since Sara Paretsky called attention to the issue in 1986. In 2009 British reviewer [Jessica Mann](#) declared that she was sick of being sent fiction that seemed to be competing to be more sensationally sadistic in its depiction of violence against

women and would no longer review such books. She particularly scolded women who write violent crime fiction.

Yet a case can be made that some popular fiction that depicts violence against women can be interpreted as feminist because of its sensitivity toward the victims of gendered violence and in view of the critique they offer of power structures that enable it. As Val McDermid said in response to Jessica Mann's complaint, "women grow up knowing that to be female is to be at risk of attack. We write about violence from the inside. Men, on the other hand, write about it from the outside." It must be noted that that the runaway international bestsellers in recent years have been the three volumes of Stieg Larsson's unapologetically feminist *Millennium Trilogy*, the first of which (*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*) was originally titled in Swedish *Män som hatar kvinnor* (Men Who Hate Women), a title Larsson insisted on retaining in spite of his publisher's reluctance.

While we cannot say that the work of the women of Sisters in Crime is done, the organization continues to serve its original mission: to advocate for equity for women crime writers, even though a survey of members shows that purpose, while embraced by a majority of members, is overshadowed by a desire to be part of an organization focused on the mystery genre. If nothing else, we can take heart in the fact that founder, Sara Paretsky, is being recognized at the 2011 Edgar Awards by the Mystery Writers of America as a Grand Master.

Author's note: though I was honored to join the board of Sisters in Crime this year, the analysis and conclusions in this paper and any errors it may contain are my own and do not represent any official stance on the part of the organization. I am grateful to the organization for their support in conducting this survey and presenting it at the Popular Culture Association meeting, to Beth Wasson and Barb Goffmann, and to the staff of Rutgers University Archives and the Newberry Library for providing me with documents related to the history of the organization.