

## Introduction

### *The Case*

In *All about Eve* (Mankiewicz, 1950), Margo Channing (Bette Davis) explains her dilemma as a woman with a career as a star of the stage:

Funny business—a woman’s career. The things you drop on your way up the ladder so you can move faster; you forget you’ll need them again when you get back to being a woman. It’s the one career all females have in common whether we like it or not: being a woman. Sooner or later we’ve got to work at it, no matter how many other careers we’ve had or wanted. And in the last analysis, nothing’s any good unless you can look up just before dinner or turn around in bed—and there he is! Without that you’re not a woman. You’re something with a French provincial office or a book full of clippings . . . but you are not a woman.

Although Margo is speaking for the woman in postwar America, she sums up the fears of all career women in Hollywood film—from the 1930s to today. According to Hollywood, a career and marriage do not mix and without the latter, “you are not a woman.” In order to succeed at a career, a woman must abandon many of her softer, “feminine” traits and embrace the more “masculine” ones of ambition, drive, and independence; however, being too masculine drives away male suitors and—as is implied in the majority of Hollywood films—life without marriage and a family cannot be considered a successful one. Thus, if a woman in a Hollywood film chooses to have a career, then she must at least demonstrate the willingness to abandon it at some point for a man. This is the product of the assumption that there is something “unnatural” (read: masculine or lesbian) about the woman who denies the socially prescribed—but perceived as natural—roles of wife and mother. The Hollywood heroine is ultimately faced with the “problem” of finding a balance between her professional ambitions and personal happiness and of how to avoid “dropping”—on her way up the career ladder—those feminine charms she will need later to catch a husband.

“Can a woman have it all—a husband, a family, and a career? The question is hardly new, but it was back then,” Mick LaSalle notes in regard to Depression-era Hollywood film (184). Films of the 1930s offered a space for the exploration of changing women’s roles. Just as Ben Singer has reminded us of the existence and popularity of female heroines in the action serials of the 1910s that were since forgotten (“Female,” 91) and books on pre-Code film, like LaSalle’s, that remind us that female stars dominated the box office in the 1930s, so too is one aim of *Detecting Women* to recover a decade of strong female protagonists and stars all but forgotten today. The proliferation of feminist film theory and gender studies has encouraged the re-examination of women’s presence and contributions to classical Hollywood film, but only certain kinds of recovery work have been undertaken. Discussions of women in the 1930s and 40s tend to focus on the “bad girls” of pre-Code “fallen women” films or of *film noir*, or the “good girls” of the woman’s film. I am interested, however, in exploring the “good girls”—women who were the center and driving force behind narratives and presented as positive models of womanhood—at the center of the traditionally male genre of the detective film.

From her first appearance in nineteenth-century fiction to the contemporary criminalist film, the female detective has struggled to be both a successful detective and a successful woman. As Kathleen Gregory Klein indicates, this was the practice from the earliest of the British detective stories and American dime novels: the female detective—whether American or British, working or upper class—was never allowed to blend effectively the two roles of woman and detective (35). The only female detectives who seem to have avoided this dilemma are those who are either too old—e.g., spinster Jane Marple and widow Jessica Fletcher—or too young—e.g., teenager Nancy Drew—for romantic relationships and thus elude the complications that arise when career and romance compete. The vast majority of fictional female detectives from 1864 to today, however, have been forced to make a decision to pursue either love or detection because the two are seen as mutually exclusive—the former requiring the detective to be feminine and the latter masculine. In terms of feminist criticism, this exclusivity has incited debate amongst scholars whether the female detective is merely an impossible fantasy as embodying both feminine and masculine traits or a realistic advancement of female empowerment. In terms of popular debate, it is often assumed that it took the Women’s Movement beginning in the 1960s to spark empowered representations of women in Hollywood film and that classical Hollywood tended to construct female characters in keeping with old-fashioned (read: Victorian) values and gender roles. In the new millennium, we assume that we have made progress in terms of equal rights and opportunities across the lines of class, race, sexuality, and especially gender; however, contemporary mainstream film does not necessarily advance themes any more progressive than those touted in classical Hollywood films more than half a century ago. In fact, in *Detecting Women*, I will demonstrate how, before World War II,

Hollywood did offer progressive and transgressive (proto-)feminist role models who resisted their socially prescribed roles. Ironically, in a decade characterized by the economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression, Hollywood presented surprisingly sophisticated and complex debates surrounding working women. My interest in Hollywood's working women is not in those women who engaged in only what were regarded as female occupations—e.g., secretary, teacher, and nurse—but those who also engaged in the assumed male profession of criminal investigation. The prolific female detective of 1930s Hollywood film was an independent woman who put her career ahead of the traditionally female pursuits of marriage and a family and who chased crime as actively as—and most often with greater success than—the official male investigators who populated the police department.

Most importantly, the female detective did so and was not punished for her transgressions of traditional female roles—as she would be in subsequent decades. Some films concluded with the female detective rejecting marriage in



Fig. 1.1 Everybody's Favorite Aunt: Angela Lansbury as schoolteacher-turned-writer-turned-sleuth, Jessica Fletcher, in television's long-running series "Murder, She Wrote" (1984–96). Photo from author's collection.

order to pursue her career; even though more concluded with her accepting a proposal in the final scene, the female detective was allowed—throughout the course of the story—a freedom and voice as the film’s protagonist rarely offered to women in film—then and now. Indeed, the female detective was more concerned with proving her abilities as an intelligent and competent detective and “getting her man”—in terms of catching the criminal—rather than “getting a man”—in terms of matrimony. In other words, these heroines were possessed by what female detective author Mary Roberts Rinehart describes as “[a] sort of lust of investigation” (572). These women were not “something with a French provincial office or a book full of clippings;” they were strong, intelligent, exciting women who managed to balance what Margo Channing knew was impossible by 1950 and perhaps even in the new millennium—simultaneous success in their professional (“masculine”) and personal (“feminine”) lives. As such, these female detectives are exciting gender-benders that challenge the assumption that femininity and masculinity are fixed categories aligned with opposite sexes. In a decade when the Great Depression was undermining men’s assumed natural place at the top of the patriarchal order through unemployment, these working women embodied an active defiance of their socially prescribed passive position and, in effect, pursued the American Dream as self-made women.

### The Crime Scene Kit

For a group of films to constitute a genre they must share a common topic and a common structure (Altman, 23). The detective film has the common topic of the investigation of a crime and the common structure of the detective as protagonist driving the narrative forward to a resolution of the investigation. A genre is a body of films that have narratives, structures, settings, conventions and/or characters in common and that are readily recognizable to audiences and promotable by producers. For example, a film with a hardboiled hero sporting a fedora, trench coat, gun, and cigarette, operating in the shadows of city streets at night or in the rain, and faced with the temptation of a sultry but potentially dangerous woman is likely a *film noir*. A genre is the product of popularity: the box-office success of one type of film leads to imitators and, once a critical number of films sharing similar tropes and structures appears, a genre is declared. A film’s popularity may, of course, be influenced by a variety of factors: a star’s appeal, a director’s name, an effective advertising campaign, positive word-of-mouth, or a specific release date, etc. I would assert, however, that films that offer protagonists, narratives, issues, or themes that seem outdated in terms of contemporary social attitudes will be unlikely to prove popular with audiences and inspire imitation. Correspondingly, while audiences like to see the same *kind* of film over and over again, they do not want to see the *same film*: innovation and change are as much a part of a genre film as its familiar conventions. As

Rick Altman argues, change must occur within a genre otherwise it would go sterile (21). Genre hybridity (blending conventions) and parody (sending up established conventions) make genre films appear fresh to audiences.

The focus of *Detecting Women* is the detective film that offers a female protagonist at the center of the narrative and who actively—physically (i.e., as a crime-fighter) and/or mentally (i.e., as a sleuth)—investigates a mystery surrounding a crime or a criminal racket. Many mystery-comedy films and series focused on married detective couples—inspired by the popularity of MGM’s Nick and Nora Charles (William Powell and Myrna Loy) in *The Thin Man* (Van Dyke, 1934). MGM made five additional “Thin Man” films (1936–47) and started a new series featuring Joel and Garda Sloane (1938–39).<sup>1</sup> Columbia tried to compete with MGM’s sparring couples with their own, William and Sally Reardon (1938).<sup>2</sup> The couple-detective film sees the married twosome work together on a case with the male detective as the lead investigator and his wife as his assistant in a Sherlock Holmes/Dr. Watson dynamic. However, *Detecting Women* excludes the popular detective-couple film as it deviates from the core theme explored in films with a central female detective; namely the struggle of a single woman in pursuing a career in a male world. The female detective can be an amateur—a schoolteacher, nurse, or reporter who investigates the murders that occur in the course of her day job—or a professional of which there are far fewer until the 1990s—a policewoman or private investigator who investigates crime for a living.

I concede that for many people the term “detective” can evoke ideas of the classical sleuth rather than necessarily other kinds of investigative protagonists.<sup>3</sup> In the broadest sense, there are two types of detective-hero (male or female): the criminologist (the popular term in the 1930s)/criminalist (the popular term today)—better known as the sleuth—and the undercover agent (professional)/crime-fighter (amateur).<sup>4</sup> These two types are distinguished by their relationship to the community they investigate and their skill set as investigators of crime. In the case of the criminologist/criminalist, the criminal typically works alone and his or her crime is murder rather than a drugs or prostitution racket; the detective occupies a position as an outsider with specialized knowledge—whether deductive reasoning, behavioral profiling, forensics analysis, crime scene investigation, or personal familiarity—that can be utilized to investigate a crime. Rather than being on hand to witness criminal acts, the criminologist/criminalist arrives after the crime has been committed and must “read” the evidence to identify “whodunit.” This type of detective does not necessarily have to possess fighting or weaponry skills in order to defeat the criminal physically but, instead, requires a degree of intelligence and/or experience to unravel the mystery or outsmart the criminal. While the investigation of the criminologist/criminalist includes analyzing clues, questioning witnesses, and drawing conclusions from the information gathered, that of the undercover agent/crime-fighter involves being on hand to witness the criminal activities. The undercover agent/crime-

fighter has specialized knowledge and/or skills that allow her to infiltrate a specific criminal community, pass effectively as one of them, and ultimately expose the ring from the inside. It is in this undercover mode that the female detective employs the masquerade of femininity to disguise her more “masculine” (i.e., crime-fighting) abilities from the criminal ring and the threat they imply. In other words, her femininity functions as a decoy—as the television series “Decoy” (1957–59) starring Beverly Garland as an undercover cop confirms. Lastly, in the case of the undercover investigator, rather than the identity of the criminal(s) being a mystery—i.e., whodunit?—the aim of the investigator and the conclusion of the investigation are to see the criminals brought to justice. While sleuthing is mainly a mental process that can be undertaken *in absentia* of the crime scene (thus the idea of the “armchair detective” who can solve the mystery without leaving her own living room), crime-fighting is a physical process involving both being present during the criminal activities and in terms of the method by which the criminals will be defeated.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the ability of films to reflect social reality, it is imperative to bear in mind that Hollywood’s is, using Richard Maltby’s term, a “commercial aesthetic”: the primary function of a Hollywood film is to entertain in order to attract audiences and make a profit (*Hollywood*, 14–15). Therefore, Hollywood narratives and characters are likely to be more exciting and dramatic than the reality that generates them. The number of star “girl reporters” investigating headlining stories in Hollywood films of the 1930s was not representative of the reality of women’s experiences in journalism with the vast majority of them relegated to the society column; however, Hollywood is quite accurate in its omission of female police officers and federal agents from its narratives until the 1990s as there were few in reality. Instead, the vast majority of Hollywood’s female detectives are amateur sleuths or undercover crime-fighters who investigate out of personal interest rather than as a career detective. Whether or not the representation of female detectives is grounded in reality is less the issue than what those representations and their alteration over time indicate about changing social attitudes toward women and heroism.

The male detective has appeared consistently in Hollywood film since the coming of sound in the late 1920s, which made possible the cinematic rendering of the convoluted plots and dialogue-heavy explanations of the classical detective story. As I have explored previously in *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (2006), the British classical sleuth and the softboiled versions of American fiction’s hardboiled detectives dominated the screen in the 1930s; the 1940s saw both replaced by the American hardboiled private eye in *film noir*; the private eye was replaced by the police detective who shifted from conservative and stable in the late 1940s, to neurotic and often corrupt during the 1950s, to almost absent from the screen in the 1960s, to a violent vigilante by the early 1970s. The hardboiled private eye returned in the late 1970s and early 80s but was overshadowed by the dominance of the cop as

action-hero by the mid-80s. The 1990s and 2000s, however, saw the return of the sleuth in the educated, intelligent, middle-class criminalist. Although other kinds of detectives existed during each of these decades, these were the dominant trends within the genre of the detective film and each represents a shift in social attitudes toward law and order and the type of masculinity that society deems heroic. This is the history of the male detective, however, and I have been as remiss as other scholars for all but ignoring women in my research and writing about the detective film.

The aim of *Detecting Women* is to redress the exclusion of women from discussions of the genre as central heroes. As such, this study delineates the popular trends in terms of the female detective in film, the social issues that each trend explores, and the social attitudes toward women that each espouses. Surprisingly, the female detective appears alongside her male counterpart early in both detective fiction and film and, in the 1930s, tended to be an amateur sleuth, an undercover agent, or a girl reporter. The “masculinity” that defined the character in the 1930s gave way to her feminization in the early 1940s, and her pervasiveness during the Depression was succeeded by her gradual disappearance in the immediate post-World War II period. In marked contrast to her independence, fast-talk, and career success of the 1930s, the female detective—in her handful of outings in 1940s *film noir*—wanted to be a dutiful wife rather than an independent career woman, and her only motive to unravel the mystery was to save the man she loves. After 1950, the white female detective left the big screen, except for a couple of rare outings, until the 1980s. In the early 1970s, however, there was a cluster of black female investigators in blaxploitation films and, just as the white male detective had become a vigilante hero at the time, so too was this female detective a crime-fighting avenger. In the 1980s, the female detective exploded in popularity—on television with cops Cagney and Lacey and sleuth Jessica Fletcher; in fiction with hardboiled private eye V.I. Warshawski and FBI profiler Clarice Starling; and in film with the prolific female lawyer. The female detective continued in popularity in the 1990s and 2000s and, just as the male detective had become a criminalist, so too did the female detective become an expert in crime scene investigation, behavioral science, and forensics.

My interest in the figure of the female detective is manifold. Although there have been many studies produced in recent years exploring the role of women in the detective genre (as authors and protagonists), few offer a broad history of the female detective and fewer still look at her history in film. The aim of the first part of the book is to recuperate the classical Hollywood female detective of the 1930s and 40s—since she has been all but ignored. The critical interrogation of the classical detective film has tended to focus on *film noir* in which there are few female detectives and, instead, independent women tend to be demonized as the lethal *femme fatale*. Related to that is the concern that contemporary film audiences seem to regard classical Hollywood

as a less sophisticated and progressive version of contemporary film. *Detecting Women* thus offers a re-evaluation of today's popular conception that classical Hollywood contained few strong and/or transgressive models of "good girls." Critics have explored the impact of the Production Code on the representation of women, sex, and violence in Hollywood film; nevertheless, the representation of the female detective transcends the pre- and post-Code division of 1934 and, instead, is indicative of the effects of the Depression and World War II on society's prescribed sex roles.

The representation of the female detective altered greatly between the early and late 1930s as I will explore in subsequent chapters, but 1934 was not the decisive moment of change. When I began my research into female detectives of the 1930s, I assumed that the Code would account for the arrival and proliferation of the girl reporter. After all, as Andrea Walsh suggests, "Code-prescribed limits on sexuality inadvertently promoted the 'career heroine'" (138). Perhaps the Code can account for the female reporter's increased presence by the mid-30s but her appearance in late silent and early sound film was the result of broader socioeconomic influences, including the Depression and the shift in gender roles the crisis initiated. Similarly, although many critics have noted the shift in gender roles in postwar film (i.e., *film noir*), the return to a more traditional gender dichotomy coincided with the *beginning* of World War II. The representation of women in Hollywood film seems to be the most transgressive between 1929 and 1933 in that working women were generally presented as "hardboiled" by their experiences in the Depression-era city and most likely to choose independence and a career over marriage. During the mid-30s, the working woman seemed to want both—a career and romance—and was, surprisingly, sometimes able to achieve both. However, by 1939 the tide had turned and Hollywood women were usually more desirous of love than a career, and those who chose otherwise were derided or punished. Thus, one of the aims of *Detecting Women* is to look past the pre-Code-era division and instead focus on that of the Depression/World War II in order to understand trends in the representation of independent and career-minded women; another is to explore how and why it was in the lower level B-picture mystery-comedies that these women thrived.

Hollywood had benefitted from the "leisure revolution" of the 1920s. As Steven Ross documents, motion pictures earned \$720 million in box-office receipts in 1929—a figure almost four times the combined receipts for all spectator sports and live theatrical entertainments (181). The impact of the Depression meant that money was tight for moviegoers, but theater and studio pockets were just as empty. Exhibitors tried to attract audiences back to the cinema with the institutionalization of the double feature (a B-film preceding the headlining, and typically more prestigious, A-feature). Studios resisted the practice as it meant a twofold increase in output but soon discovered that the B-picture afforded the opportunity for testing out new talent at reduced risk. As

*New York Times*' critic Leonard Spinrad suggests, after the success of series like the "Charlie Chan" films in the 1930s, "The mystery story became honey for the B's" (4 Sept 1948). And it is the B-picture in which, I argue, the exciting and positive representations of independent women—women who challenged social discourses about gender—appeared. The Depression affected not only the film industry as a business, facilitating the proliferation and dominance of the B-picture throughout the decade, but also Hollywood's narratives, characters, and themes whether through an exploration of the impact of the crisis on American national identity or its disavowal.

Similarly, I found that, in discussions of the female detective, another decade and series of films has been ignored: blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. While film criticism has acknowledged the alternative representations of raced masculinity that blaxploitation offered, feminist film critics have only recently explored African-American women in roles that were unavailable to white women in mainstream film at the time. The short-lived but prolific movement (approximately 1971–75) saw a shift from white, conservatively heterosexual women to black, self-determined sexual women and the female detective shift from a sleuth to a woman of action, echoing the male crime-fighters of the period (e.g., *Dirty Harry* and *Shaft*). Just as the economic crisis of the Depression created a social climate amenable to women who transgressed traditional social roles, so too did the social upheavals of the late 1960s caused by the Women's and Civil Rights Movements see many Americans desirous of films that challenged the status quo. As Maltby suggests, the early 1970s—just as in the early 1930s—was a period when a combination of economic conditions and technological developments destabilized the established patterns of audience preference, creating opportunities for greater experimentation and variation from Hollywood's established norms ("More"). The economic changes Maltby is referring to included the collapse of the studio system and the replacement of the system of self-censorship (the Production Code) with the system of ratings (i.e., G for general, R for restricted). Blaxploitation films were regarded as B-grade films, thus it would seem that the space for the experimentation is often in the lower levels of production—the series of the 1930s and the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. As Maltby qualifies, however, the experimentation was not necessarily subversive nor did it entail complete deviations from social attitudes and mores; instead, these variations "occurred within strict limits and existed, in large part, to test, negotiate and reconfigure the boundaries of Hollywood's conventions" rather than to supplant them (*ibid.*).

Thus, *Detecting Women* explores how often the most interesting and challenging representations of the female detective occur on the margins—in 1930s B-mystery comedies and 1970s exploitation films—rather than in big-budget and award-winning films. Eventually familiarity may breed parody or contempt, but initially popularity breeds imitation: the large number of B-detective series in the 1930s is a case in point. Even when imitation has occurred in what

have been perceived traditionally as the lesser strata of motion pictures—e.g., B-pictures, comedies, exploitation films—it nevertheless denotes popularity and popularity suggests that a cultural nerve has been struck. Audiences vote with their box-office dollars to see more of the same—whether that is an interrogation of relevant social, economic, or political issues or an escape from them. Despite the cultural turn in academic scholarship from the reification of high culture over mass culture (as with the influential Frankfurt School) to the embracement of popular culture because of its mass appeal and consumption (as with the later Birmingham School of Cultural Studies), there remains a hierarchy of texts worthy of study and praise. While the terms “popular” and “mainstream” may persist in carrying with them derogatory connotations, a lack of prestige does not necessarily mean a lack of relevance when studying culture and its products.

The female detectives of 1930s B-pictures and 1970s blaxploitation films offer representations and models of femininity not necessarily available in more prestigious and serious dramas. In contrast, the female detective in Hollywood's dramas has—whether in the 1940s in a reaction to World War II or in the 1980s in response to the gender war—mainly offered a reflection of masculine backlash as much as feminist gain. As John Thompson suggests in his “Note” for *The Trouble with Women* (Lanfield, 1947) for the *Toronto Film Society*,

Like all films, *The Trouble with Women* must be viewed in the context of the time in which it was made, given then-prevailing attitudes and conventions. It is a lighthearted look at the subject—the equality of the sexes—which, oddly enough, is seldom explored currently in a serious manner by Hollywood. (11 Aug 1981)

Indeed, the aim of *Detecting Women* is to analyze the female detective film in the context by which and for which it is produced, informed by a cultural studies and new historicist approach. Part of my goal in this research project was to bring to light the sheer number of female detectives that have been overlooked in previous studies of the genre, especially those of the 1930s and 40s.<sup>6</sup> I screened as many of the films as I could find available as commercial copies, in archives, or on specialty television channels. Although there is not enough space in this book to discuss them all, I have tried to include as many in my discussion as possible in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of certain narratives, characters, and themes as well as the shift in emphasis that occurs between certain trends and have included the rest in Appendix II.

Lastly, my interest in the female detective was aroused because so many of them, especially in the 1930s and 1990s, were gender-benders—at the very least highlighting, and often critiquing, the socially prescribed roles available to them. The detective narrative is driven by the goal of the detective to solve the mystery of “whodunit” and that pursuit demands an active protagonist who ventures into the public realm to discover the truth. These three ideas of being

active, operating in public, and seeking the truth are associated with masculinity. The films with which this study is concerned substitute a woman in that male role and thus can open up a space for a debate about gender since the sex of the protagonist can see her at odds with the expectations of the role she attempts to fulfill. The figure of the female detective varies in terms of what she represents from being merely a novel kind of detective in the traditionally male genre to being a feminist interrogation of the myths of socially-assigned sex roles. The biological idea of sex—i.e., being born male or female—does not predetermine one's gender—i.e., that one should be masculine or feminine. Feminist scholars, notably Judith Butler, have exposed gender identity as a cultural construct employed to enforce heterosexuality and defined by a set of oppositional conceptions: masculinity is associated with being strong, dominating, rational, and active—and feminine with being weak, submissive, emotional, and passive (*Gender*, 17). Butler argues that gender is performative—that all social subjects, whether male or female, perform their gender rather than their gender stemming from some essential sense of identity.

While the female detective of the 1930s and 40s often exposed and/or challenged those sex roles, she was always white and always heterosexual. It was not until the 1970s that Hollywood offered non-white female detectives—for example, those played by Pam Grier in blaxploitation films—but they were also Hollywood's last notable female African-American detectives. The exceptions are Whoopi Goldberg's roles in *Fatal Beauty* (Holland, 1987) and *The Deep End of the Ocean* (Grosbard, 1999); however, I do not discuss these films as the former is an isolated comic occurrence not in keeping with the themes of the millennial comedies on which I focus and the latter (despite the fact that the character is not only black but also a lesbian) because she is only a secondary character in the film. Jennifer Lopez has played the only Latina detectives in high-profile films, including *Out of Sight* (Soderbergh, 1998) and *The Cell* (Singh, 2000); however, I do not discuss the former as it is less a film about investigation as it is a romance between a thief and the detective (in the vein of *The Thomas Crown Affair* [Jewison, 1968 and McTiernan, 1999] nor the latter as it is a film more concerned with the relegation of the detective to the role of *femme fatale*. And neither film highlights her ethnicity as an issue or potential skill. In contrast, the blaxploitation heroine is empowered as a crime-fighter *because* of her race—because she has specialized knowledge of the black community—and *because* of her sex—because she can infiltrate a criminal organization unsuspected. And here the female detective uses female stereotypes against men: after all, no one ever suspects that a beautiful woman can have the brains and brawn to see justice served. Thus, rather than being women playing a male role, these female detectives offer a range of femininities and masculinities—in effect, blurring the lines of gender.

And many female detectives in the 1990s and 2000s, in a response to the growing visibility of lesbian culture especially in the detective genre, represent the blurring of the lines of sexuality as well. While the “dyke dicks” of

lesbian fiction may not have made it to the big screen, they did influence their Hollywood sisters by encouraging, or capitalizing on, a queering of the female detective's identity. Bobbie Robinson sums up the critical discourse surrounding the contemporary female criminalist:

[Ruby Rich] characterizes female dicks as “crisscrossing the bodies of sex and gender” (24). Glenwood Irons calls their work “gender bending,” and Pricilla Walton and Manina Jones say, more simply, that the female dick “performs gender” (102). (95–96)

Robinson addresses the concerns that critics have had regarding the contemporary female detective of fiction, notably Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, in terms of gender identity. While Eluned Summers-Bremner sees Scarpetta as a hardboiled detective in a skirt and that “inevitably it's her femininity that's in doubt” (134), Sabine Vanacker suggests that the female detective is divorced from her traditional role of life giving (i.e., as a potential mother) and, instead, is reinscribed as a “dealer in death, who aggressively ‘manhandles’ the corpses of victims and gruesomely thrives on decaying and decomposing bodies” (66). Robinson suggests that critics such as Summers-Bremner and Vanacker fail to consider the entirety of the female detective's identity and that Scarpetta (and I would add other contemporary detectives such as Clarice in *The Silence of the Lambs* [Demme, 1991] and M. J. in *Copycat* [Amiel, 1995]) identify with those corpses as victims—and, importantly, they are typically female victims (99). This “tenderness” and humanism that Robinson identifies is what I argue is a specifically female approach to homicide investigation that empowers the female detective and sees her succeed where often the male investigators in the narrative fail. Just as Robinson suggests, “With mixed images, Cornwell forces her readers to examine their assumptions about constructing femininity and masculinity” (106), I suggest that so too does the female criminalist film.

### The Case Log

The first part of the book focuses on the female detectives of classical Hollywood film. Chapter 2 explores the history and key conventions of the female detective as established in nineteenth-century detective fiction. The “problem” with having a female heroine at the center of the detective story at the end of the nineteenth century was how to reconcile traditional notions of femininity with the perceived masculine demands of the detective plot—a problem that seems to plague the fictional female detective in contemporary film. Chapter 3 details how the detective film emerged during early sound film and how the codes and conventions of the genre were rapidly established and solidified in a reaction to the economic and social impact of the Depression—especially the represen-

tation of the modern, urban, working woman. Chapter 4 examines why the amateur detective—including schoolmarm Hildegard Withers, teenager Nancy Drew, and nurse Sarah Keate—were afforded more success and freedom in the 1930s than the few examples of professional female detectives who attempted to make a career out of detecting. While many of these series heroines were drawn from literary sources—Mary Roberts Rinehart’s Nurse Adams, Mignon G. Eberhart’s Nurse Keate, and Stuart Palmer’s Hildegard Withers—Hollywood was producing its own kind of female detective who was an independent, brash, and outspoken working girl: the “girl reporter.” Thus, Chapter 5 explores how Hollywood’s prolific girl reporter embodied a deliberation on gender roles in the 1930s as a female protagonist who could be independent and successful in the assumed male world of work and one that was not necessarily punished for her transgression of the borders between male/female and public/private space. Chapter 6 focuses on the demise of the girl reporter in 1940s Hollywood film and the transformation of the female detective in general to a figure of parody, passivity, or—by the 1950s—questionable sanity. Chapter 7 examines how, in *film noir*, the sex of the investigating protagonist results in a hybridization of generic conventions with the narrative being driven forward as much by the female protagonist’s personal desires (as with a melodrama) as by her investigation (as in a male-centered *noir* film).

The last part of the book focuses on the female detective of postclassical film. Chapter 8 considers the female crime-fighters of 1970s blaxploitation films—representing the few examples of non-white female detectives in American film—to date. Chapter 9 details how the only prominent female detective-figure in the 1980s was the lawyer and how she was the product of male anxieties resulting in a seemingly feminist, while simultaneously reactionary, image of female empowerment. Chapter 10 concludes the study with a look at the rise of the criminalist investigator who specializes in behavioral, crime scene, and forensic science—as well as the popularity of the chick flick detective-comedy.

Nick Browne argues that film genre criticism has often tended to focus on the regulation, classification, and explanation of film through the lens of genre and, instead, should explore film genres as gravitating toward “specific assemblages of local coherencies—discreet, heterotopic instances of a complex cultural politics” (xi). More recently, scholars have explored film genres as products of specific socioeconomic and industrial moments rather than as a cohesive body of films over a long period of time. The detective genre as a term, then, does connote consistency over the decades as it identifies a group of texts with the common topic of the investigation of a crime and the common structure of the detective as protagonist; however, the genre is not cohesive in terms of its representation of female detectives. *Detecting Women* investigates the dominant trends within that overarching genre that, in themselves, offer a cohesive investigation of women in the male world of criminal investigation but, in contrast with one another, illuminate the changes in the social conception of gender



Fig. 1.2. *Guilty as Charged*: Rebecca De Mornay as a female lawyer in *Guilty as Sin* (1993) juggling her career and romance (although not with Don Johnson pictured here). Photo from author's collection.

over time. Rather than search for generic cohesion, I explore the individual trends that were popular in specific decades in order to demonstrate that the thematic concerns of films are determined less by generic convention and more by socioeconomic change. The detective film—whether featuring a sleuth or a criminalist, and crime in the Depression-era metropolis or twenty-first-century cyberspace—presents a fantasy of resolution for social anxieties concerning crime—and, more interestingly, gender. Through an investigation of the evolution of the detective film—and its relationship to changing social conceptions of gender—we can recover the history of detecting women in film.