It was a dark and stormy night; a blood curling scream cuts through the sound of heavy rain and thunder. A murder has just been committed, a murder most foul; the police are baffled, no clues can be found, and it appears as if the murderer has committed the perfect crime. That is, until a private detective is hired to solve the case however, this is not your typical cigarette smoking, whiskey drinking, cynical, wisecracking tough-guy dressed in a trench coat and fedora, packing a heat and ready to use it. No, this is a new type of detective. A woman who can solve the case while dealing with the issues that permeate the lives of women everywhere throughout the world; a woman who will not allow anyone or anything to stand in her way as she cracks the case.

Detective novels have historically featured a strong, silent type male protagonist who showed little to no emotion and walks a fine line between right and wrong. Women in these novels are generally regulated to femme fatales, fast or loose, or the damsel in distress. More often than not, women in these novels are the butt of many jokes and the detectives usually, although not explicitly stated, are only interested in sleeping with the women who hire them. Bethe Schoenfeld in her article, “Women Writers Writing about Detectives in Twenty-First Century America”, looks at women writers of detective novels, their female protagonists, and struggles of being a woman in the twenty-first century. The basic premise of the article is these women writers write about women’s
issues while having strong feminine characters taking on a role that was once only
dominated by men.

Bethe Schoenfeld believes that women writers such as Mary Daheim and Diane
Mott Davidson use fiction to write about the very serious issues that women face such as
domestic abuse, divorce, juggling family life and a career, and living as a women in a
male dominate world. Schoenfeld contends that women writers of detective fiction have
an innate ability to write about these issues since they are about women written by
women. I am not sure I completely agree with her assessment. Assuming these are purely
works of fiction and the author has not herself experienced the social or domestic issues
facing their characters, then who is to say a male writer could not write about these same
issues with a female protagonist? To just assume a women can knowing write about all of
the various issues women face just because of their gender, is a sexist notion and one
without merit.

Another aspect of women writers that Schoenfeld explores is the contention these
are middle-class writers and their work is intended for middle-class women readers. I am
not sure by what standard Schoenfeld uses to determine middle-class. Many of the
women writers featured in Schoenfeld’s article are graduates from prestigious universities
with Master’s and Ph.D. degrees and while they may have been raised in a middle- or
working-class environment, many of their female readers have not been afforded the
same opportunity to rise to the same level of educational or career opportunity. I’m also
not convinced that these detective stories cater to middle-class women only. The
contention that lower-, working-, high-class women, and men from all socio-economic
classes cannot understand or appreciate the writings of these women appears to me to be
somewhat misguided and suggests that this subgenre is either too high brow for those below the middle-class level and not worth reading if one is a man or in the higher-class of female society.

Schoenfeld contends that women writers are best suited to write about women. To that end, Schoenfeld looks at the way women writers of detective novels speak to their female readers. She contends that these writers are able to tap into the American culture from a woman’s point of view. Schoenfeld believes writers such as Janet Evanovich, Rita Mae Brown, Trella Crespi, and Dianna Mott Davison are able to convey a woman’s sense of humor, information on domestic animals, ethnic culture, or cooking recipes. While I tend to agree that a woman writer would likely have a better understanding on how other women think however, this would also be sexist since the implication is that a man is unable think as a woman.

It is interesting to note that in these detective novels, these women authors have male characters who either assist or hinder the female protagonist as she attempts to solve the case. Schoenfeld does not attempt to justify or explain how women writers portray their male characters; she only touches on how these writers portray them as cheaters, wife beaters, murders, or the occasional help mate. Again, this is sexist and a supposed typical male stereotype. It appears on the one hand that men are unable to properly write as a woman or the issues that are important to women. On the other hand, it appears perfectly acceptable for women writers to write as a man or how the typical man acts or behaves.

Bethe Schoenfeld does an excellent job in exploring the roots of female detective writers and carefully walks one through how these earlier writers were the foundation for
the modern female detective writers we have today. Schoenfeld compares and contrasts the writings of these female writers against their male counterparts and while she does not attempt to suggest one is better than the other, on could infer from the article that Schoenfeld herself may believe the women writers can speak to her and other women in a way a male author cannot.

Women have had to struggle and fight for the civil rights they have today, this is also true of women struggling and fighting for the right to write and publish in genres that have typically been male dominated. Bethe Schoenfeld presents the female side of detective writing and carefully explains how these writers create novels that appeal and attract a female audience and how they turned the standard formula for detective novels into a whole other direction. While some of Schoenfeld’s contentions and the inference I receive from reading her article I do not agree with such as, the ideal that male writers are unable to properly explore or write from a female point of view or how many these novels by these women authors are geared toward the middle-class woman. This is a powerful, well written, and logically constructed article and argument on the part of Beth Schoenfeld and opens a whole new world on detective novels, women authors, and how the two come together not only as words on a page but, as an empowerment for women to challenge the status quo and to keep reaching for new heights.