



Gaslighting: Domestic Noir, the Narratives of Coercive Control

Deborah Philips

To cite this article: Deborah Philips (2021) Gaslighting: Domestic Noir, the Narratives of Coercive Control, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 32:2, 140-160, DOI: [10.1080/09574042.2021.1932258](https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1932258)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1932258>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 68



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Gaslighting: Domestic Noir, the Narratives of Coercive Control

Abstract: ‘Gaslighting’ as a term derives from Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 melodrama *Gas Light*, a play in which an older husband sets out to drive his wife to madness. These tropes, the suspiciously charming man, the claustrophobic domestic setting and the terrorized woman, would find new iterations in the first decades of the new millennium which saw the growth of a disturbing new genre described by publishers and booksellers as ‘domestic noir’. In its discussion of crime novels by Emily Barr, Fiona Barton, Sharon Bolton, Elizabeth Haynes, alongside the bestsellers *The Girl on the Train* and *Gone Girl*, Philips suggests that the genre of ‘domestic noir’ directly addresses crimes against women, including child abuse, domestic violence, sexual harassment and intimidation. She argues that these novels were charting the psychological abuse of women before coercive control was recognized as a criminal offence, and that what makes the genre a new phenomenon is that their protagonists are allowed to exact an often brutal retribution.

Keywords: gaslighting, coercive control, domestic violence, thriller, crime fiction

‘Gaslighting’ as a term derives from Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 melodrama, *Gas Light*, a play in which an older husband sets out to drive his wife to madness.¹ The husband, Manningham, is described in the stage directions as ‘tall, good-looking ... He has a fine figure and is perhaps a little too well dressed. His manner is suave and authoritative, with a touch of mystery and bitterness’ (Hamilton 1939: 7). That combination of urbane good looks, seedy charm and an air of a mysterious past constructed a prototype for the seductive man who first presents as a romantic hero but who is not all that he seems. Manningham infantilises his wife from the very

1 *Gas Light* was filmed twice, once directed by Thorold Dickenson in 1940, starring Anton Walbrook and Diana Wynyard, and by George Cukor in 1944, with Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer.

beginning of the play, ‘there’s a good child’; he humiliates her in front of the servants, flirts with the maid and repeatedly suggests that she suffers from an ‘extraordinary confusion of mind’ (Hamilton 1939: 9). The effects of this authoritarian bullying are clear from the character description of Mrs Manningham: ‘she has a haggard, wan, frightened air, with rings under her eyes, which tell of sleepless nights and worse’ (Hamilton 1939: 7). The ‘worse’, it transpires, is a literal ‘gas lighting’ as Manningham works on the light fittings to relentlessly undermine his wife’s sanity.

These tropes, the suspiciously charming man, the claustrophobic domestic setting and the terrorized woman, would find new iterations in the first decades of the new millennium which saw the growth of a disturbing new genre described by publishers and booksellers as ‘domestic noir’. *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn was the must-read novel of 2012, followed by Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train* in 2015 (the title was apparently altered to ‘Girl’ from ‘Woman’, to align it with Flynn’s best seller).² The success of both novels led to publishers seizing on psychological thrillers with women protagonists. *The Bookseller* coined the term ‘Grip Lit’ in 2016, explaining:

‘grip lit’ is more often than not female-led (and frequently authored) fiction with a psychological and/or emotion-led hook, often revolving around a crime and, more often than not, it is not unlike a ‘thriller’ ... The bestseller lists are dotted with such titles, often with the female protagonist/instigator/narrator in question forming part of the title; a Girl that is, for example, *Gone, on a Train, in a Red Coat, with a Dragon Tattoo* ... (Arter 2016)

The narrative ‘grip’ of grip lit is the growing recognition as the narrative develops that, as in *Gas Light*, it is not the woman who is unstable, but the man who cannot be trusted. As *The Bookseller* noted, publishers packaged such titles in line with the design for *Gone Girl*, with dark photographic covers and bold sans serif lettering, and so constructed a new generic form. New novels were endorsed by other writers in the same genre, Paula Hawkins, S.J. Watson, and Gillian Flynn all regularly support other writers and titles with back cover recommendations. Book websites for readers such as www.fantasticfiction.com and www.goodreads.com consolidated the genre by clustering writers together and directing readers of one title to others of the same kind. The journalist Eva Wiseman, writing from the experience of her own reading of fiction, identified these novels as a genre in 2017:

² Both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on a Train* were made into Hollywood movies, the former directed by David Fincher in 2014, *The Girl on a Train* by Tate Taylor in 2016

Girls on trains, with tattoos, lost, forgotten, broken, beautiful. Complicated girls who may or may not be dead.

There are a lot to get through, and more being published every week. ... There are so many 'girl' thrillers on the shelves that they have become a rich sub-genre, a profitable slice of noir publishing with often unreliable, always female narrators, and embossed covers in shades of storm. (Wiseman 2017)

'Domestic noir' can be seen as a hybrid sub-genre which brings together the violence of the 'hard-boiled' thriller and the 'clue-puzzle world' of detective fiction (Plain 2020: 102). It is the novelist Julia Crouch who claims to have first coined the term 'domestic noir' along with her publicist in 2013:

... my publicist at Headline and I came up with the term *Domestic Noir* ... it might be a good sub-genre home for writers like Erin Kelly, Araminta Hall, Louise Millar, Paula Daly, Samantha Hayes, even more literary types like Louise Doughty, Julie Myerson and Lionel Shriver. In a nutshell, *Domestic Noir* takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. (Crouch 2013)

The identification of a new contemporary genre was not accepted by everyone; many critics were keen to point to clear generic precedents in film and fiction. For Henry Sutton 'domestic noir' is 'a development of the psychological thriller which has its roots in early Nineteenth-Century Gothic tales such as *Northanger Abbey*' (Sutton 2018: 42). It might be odd to point to *Northanger Abbey*, parody as it is of Gothic novels, but it is the case that the contemporary domestic thriller does draw on the Gothic tropes of a terrorized woman and a sinister and ambiguous man. Sophie Hannah also argued in 2016 that the psychological thriller centred on a female protagonist and making use of unreliable narration was not a new phenomenon, claiming Daphne du Maurier, Agatha Christie, P.D. James and Ruth Rendell among others as exponents of a genre that has 'existed since days of yore' (Hannah 2013: 21).³ While Hannah and Sutton are certainly right that the domestic psychological thriller is not a new form, and that the unreliable narrator is a longstanding literary trope, there is something that is particular and contemporary about these thrillers. *Gone Girl*, *The Girl on the Train* and the novels that followed in their wake can be read as expressions of profound mistrust in a contemporary form of masculinity

3 There is much evidence that contemporary writers are well aware of this tradition in women's writing, and regularly reference *Rebecca*, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*; an updated version of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *The Woman Who Ran* by Sam Baker was published in 2012.

and of an acute awareness of the potential dangers of the domestic environment. What they all share is an account of a damaged woman, the plight of a woman who is not believed but who finally comes to exact some form of revenge on an abusive male partner. It is this element of revenge that marks out this genre, and which makes it a twenty-first century phenomenon.

Novels which fall under the category of ‘domestic noir’ contain all the elements of the thriller, as outlined by Jerry Palmer: ‘A conspiracy, which is seen as an “unnatural” or pathological disruption of an otherwise ordered world’, ‘the process of suspense’, ‘an isolated protagonist’ (Palmer 1991: 100). In his analysis of (the almost entirely male) thriller, Palmer argues that: ‘Villains’ motives, insofar as they are visible, can be reduced to three categories: profit, revenge and power’ (Palmer 1991: 16). The villain in the domestic thriller is always concerned to exert power over a woman and Palmer’s description neatly fits the male protagonists of these novels:

Power sought as an end in itself is essentially a species of personal relationship for the measure of this power is that other people are powerless before you. Your will – exercised on any matter – is paramount, other people’s subordinate. Insofar as they participate in your world at all, it is characteristically as the instruments of your will: that they have independent wills is irrelevant. The desire to relate to other people in this fashion points in the direction of sadism, in the purest sense of the word. (Palmer 1991: 17)

The domestic thriller centres on this personal relationship, and makes its sadism both explicit and, often, erotic. What these novels also do is to invert the ‘hero’ of the classic thriller into a heroine. A defining characteristic of the conventional hero, according to Palmer, is that he is a ‘lone wolf’:

... he has to be in order to be the hero. ... he may learn from interaction with others, from participation in a group, but in a deeper sense he is never really part of them. He cannot be, since he can never really trust them. It is one of the ironies of the hero’s life that he has to distrust most those closest to him: either because they might betray him, or because he has to be on his guard against weakening himself by relying too much on them. (Palmer 1991: 83)

This precisely describes the circumstances of the women protagonists in these narratives, they are mistrustful of any intimacy because their most

intimate relationship has turned abusive. They are 'lone wolves' because they are threatened and mistrustful.

The men in these novels do not initially appear to be the aggressors they are ultimately revealed to be, and the narrative tension in the novel derives, much as in Hitchcock's psychological thriller *Suspicion* (1941), from the mounting recognition that a male partner may not be trustworthy, however attentive and loving they may initially appear. In 1982 Tania Modleski had identified the 'gaslighting' genre in post-war American films (citing both Hitchcock and Daphne du Maurier as predecessors):

In many of these films, the house seems to be alive with menace, and the freely sadistic men who rule them are often suspected of trying to drive their wives insane, or to murder them as they have murdered other women in the past. (Modleski 1982: 21)⁴

That domestic menace and the sadistic man are the standard conventions of the domestic noir novel.

These narratives also articulate a particular form of domestic abuse, coercive control, which was not legally defined until 2015, a year which post-dates many of these novels. The Crown Prosecution Service defines 'coercive behaviour' in these terms:

Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim

Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour. (www.cps.gov.uk/legal/guidance)⁵

It was the charity Women's Aid which identified 'coercive control' as a form of abuse that extended beyond physical violence and which campaigned for it to become a criminal offence. Women's Aid summarizes coercive control as: 'when a person with whom you are **personally connected**, repeatedly behaves in a way which makes you feel controlled, dependent, isolated or scared' (www.womensaid.org). A fuller definition outlines ten examples which are cited as indications of coercive behaviour. These steps owe much to the work of the criminologist Jane Monckton-Smith, identified eight stages that led to what she terms 'Intimate Partner Femicide' (Monckton-Smith 2020). While none of the

⁴ *Sleeping with the Enemy*, a 1987 novel by Nancy Price was made into a film in 1991 (dir. Joseph Ruben) and is an early forerunner in which a woman is threatened by and escapes a controlling husband.

⁵ All websites accessed April 2021.

women protagonists in these novels are actually murdered (although most suffer violent assaults), their narratives do chart patterns of behaviour from (mostly, although not entirely) male protagonists which are directly in line with these legal definitions and which depict most, and sometimes all, of Monckton-Smith's stages. From *Gaslighting* to *The Girl on the Train* these narratives describe 'a pattern of assaults, threats, humiliation and intimidation', designed to control and frighten.

After an initial print run of 40,000, Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on a Train*⁶ sold over 11 million copies and was the bestselling title on Amazon in 2015 (Dorward 2016: 34). It shares the fractured narrative structure of *Gone Girl*, with the narration switching between the three women involved with Tom, the ex-husband of the primary narrator, Rachel. Like Amy of *Gone Girl*, Rachel presents as an unreliable narrator, swigging gin on her commuter journey, with gaps in her memory and a tendency to blackouts. In a 2016 article on Hawkins, Jamie Dorward wrapped the two novels together, arguing that *The Girl on the Train* was 'a book that was bang on trend. Rachel's unreliable narrator drew comparisons with Gillian Flynn's blockbuster ... and demonstrated there was a huge demand for dark psychological thrillers with strong, complex female characters' (Dorward 2016: 34).

At the outset of the novel, Rachel does not appear to be a 'strong' character, or able to exact any kind of revenge, she is abject, drinking heavily and weaving a fantasy about a good-looking man and woman she sees from the train, assuming them to be an enviably happy couple. Rachel has good reason to drink, her commute is unnecessary as she has lost her job as well as her husband, who with his new wife Anna and their baby (to heighten the bitterness, Rachel was unable to conceive with Tom) also appears to be in a blissfully happy relationship. In an unlikely coincidence, it later transpires that the woman seen from the train, Megan, has had an affair with Tom and is pregnant with his child. None of the apparently happy relationships in the novel are as sound as they first appear, and every male character is a potential suspect in the disappearance and, it transpires, murder of Megan. It is eventually revealed that Tom has been gaslighting Rachel throughout their marriage and its aftermath, and while he does not exact direct violence against her until the end of the novel, he does demonstrate all the factors of controlling behaviour, encouraging her in her drinking and claiming that the drinking has led to behaviours that she in fact never enacted. He is guilty of the femicide of Megan and is finally murderously violent towards Rachel. Throughout the novel she is disbelieved, by Anna the second wife, and by the police who accept her ex-husband's account of her as an alcoholic and embittered ex-wife; Rachel and her intelligence are underestimated by

⁶ *The Girl on a Train* was written by Paula Hawkins, a journalist who already had a track record of single women novels, under the name of Amy Silver.

everyone she comes across. In the final denouement, she joins ranks with her former rival Anna to finish off their abusive husband (Hawkins 2016). Frances Wilson has pointed out that the narrative power of the novel derives from its representation of the domestic space as unsafe:

What kept me glued to *The Girl on the Train* ... was Rachel's crazy, obsessional nature. She is a stalker, a voyeur, a detective, an alcoholic whose ex-husband, now remarried, persuades her that she has no memory. The book tapped into my nerve centre because it addressed what I fear to confront: that the home is not a safe place to be. (Wilson 2016: 48)

The text that most haunts the genre of domestic noir is Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel *Rebecca*, which itself reworks both the fairy tale 'Bluebeard' and *Jane Eyre*. Sally Beauman has described it as 'strange, angry and prescient novel' (Beauman 2007: 47) and *Rebecca* continues to haunt. Emily Barr's 2011 novel *The First Wife* is set in Cornwall, as is *Rebecca*, and directly references it in its plot of an ingénue young woman charmed by an older and charismatic man and haunted by his absent first wife. Like Rebecca, the apparently ideal former wife, is not, as the cover line puts it, 'all that she seems', and the husband is not innocent, but unlike Du Maurier's sympathetic portrayal of the desirable Maxim (played by Laurence Olivier in the 1940 Hitchcock film), Barr does not let the husband off the hook. The novel's opening makes it clear that Lily Button (an appropriately childlike and fairy tale name), is, like the unnamed narrator of *Rebecca*, isolated, very young and vulnerably naive. She has been brought up by her grandparents, in rural isolation in a Cornish cottage: 'I had not left Cornwall once, not in my entire life' (Barr 2011: 14). Left bereft and with no inheritance on the deaths of her grandparents, Lily takes advice from the Citizens' Advice Bureau, rents a room in a chaotic but charming family home which provides her with a surrogate family. She takes a job as a cleaner and is sent to the 'smart part of town' where she is employed by the glamorous couple Harry and Sarah Summer. For the agent who employs her, Harry is a figure of respectful awe: 'Harry Summer—everyone knows him. Looks like a movie star. Used to be on the telly ...' (Barr 2011: 29).

The Summers' house, like Lily's name, has a fairy tale quality, she first approaches it much like Beauty approaching the Beast's castle: 'This was a different world ... it was like being in an enchanted kingdom' (Barr 2011: 30). The house has an 'allure of familiarity': 'I thought of the little cottage that I had assumed would be mine. Although this was a different sort of house altogether, it was the same, too. there was something magical about both of them' (Barr 2011: 31). The magical and elegant house

nonetheless has an aura of squalor: ‘When I looked closely, the whole place was strangely dirty: the loos were stained, the fridge was filthy with dried on splatters of food and their bedroom had a pervasive smell of bodies and sweat and feet to it’ (Barr 2011: 33). When Harry makes his first appearance he, like the house, has a magical quality, apparently a prince in waiting: ‘... the charm of the man. He was handsome like a film star, his face impossibly proportioned to be the perfect, ideal face for the male of the species, his hair glossy, his shoulders broad’ (Barr 2011: 56). Sarah, his wife, is beautiful and elegant, but Lily is made to understand (by Harry) that ‘everything about her smiling, gracious persona ... had been a fake’ (Barr 2011: 105). Sarah, like Rebecca, has apparently drowned in what her husband claims was a suicide. Like Maxim de Winter, Manningham, and Tom of *The Girl on a Train*, Harry constructs a version of his wife as unstable. Her image haunts Lily: ‘I would lie awake imagining her whispering malevolent things into my ears’ (Barr 2011: 192). Lily initially sees a protector in Harry, but it becomes increasingly clear that he is infantilising her, dictating her clothes and her friendships. As in *Gas Light*, Harry undermines Lily by small changes in the household, moving domestic objects and putting the shirts which she has ironed back in the laundry basket.

In a melodramatic finale Lily confronts the ‘first wife’ in Barcelona, and for the first time the ‘real Harry’ is revealed. This is Beauty and the Beast in reverse, Harry is unveiled not as a Prince, but as an abusive husband with a history of violence towards women. He has also killed a man in a drunk driving accident; his motive for a relationship with Lily is that she is prepared to give him an alibi. Lily comes to recognize that she has been subjected to gaslighting, as Sarah explains her similar experiences: ‘He started by making me doubt myself ... making me think I was going mad. Little things. He’d ruin something I was cooking by turning the oven off ... so I thought I was losing my mind’ (Barr 2011: 390). Like *The Girl on the Train*, the novel is replete with toxic and fractured marriages; Lily’s friend and mentor Al is a gay man who is furtively involved with a married man, another parallel narrative recounts an unhappy marriage in which the husband discovers his wife with two of his rugby team.

When Harry finally turns his abuse towards Lily, in a vicious assault, she resolves to exact her revenge:

There was nothing in the world, at that moment, that I cared about, apart from this: *I was going to bring him down*. I was going to make him pay for the things he had done ... I knew exactly what I had to do. (Barr 2011: 382)

Lily ends the novel less innocent, she testifies against Harry and does 'bring him down' in a 'spectacular downfall' (Barr 2011: 398). Like Jane Eyre, at the end of the novel she becomes magically financially independent (in a final fairy tale flourish, her grandparents have hidden an inheritance for her in the cottage). Lily is finally in a position to stand with Du Maurier's narrator: 'bold at last. At any rate I have lost my diffidence, my timidity, my shyness with strangers. I am very different ...' (Du Maurier 1992: 38). Like *Rebecca's* unnamed narrator, Lily is disabused of her illusions, but the difference is that Lily does not forgive and she does bring Harry down.

It is not only women writers who are concerned with sinister forms of masculinity. Despite the gender neutral name of S.J. Watson, the 2011 *Before I Go to Sleep* is a first person woman's narrative authored by a man which entirely conforms to the conventions of domestic noir. The narrative begins with a dislocation, in which the heroine is unclear as to where she is or who she is: 'the bedroom is strange. Unfamiliar, I don't know where I am or how I came to be here. I don't know how I 'm going to get home' (Watson: 13). Christine is an amnesiac, which she initially believes to have been caused by an accident. The amnesia has made her entirely dependent on her husband, Ben. She is reliant on him to recover her lost memory and the narrative of their marriage; both the reader and the narrator are required to work out who she is and what has happened to her. There is a gap between the sense Christine has of herself as a young woman and the woman she appears to have become, a suburban wife. The self she sees in the mirror is not only older but neglected, a self she does not recognize, the house she inhabits does not feel like home: 'It is smart, comfortable. Blandly middle class' (Watson: 21). Christine has no means of doing anything but 'keeping busy' with routine household tasks, but she nonetheless recognizes that her husband and home are alien to her: 'My husband, my home, my life ... these things do not belong to me. They are not part of me' (Watson: 24). The life that Christine has been forced into is an alternative way of being, and one which she would not herself have chosen. Ben has constructed a version of Christine and a narrative of her life; he has compiled a scrap book which seems to affirm her role as wife, but she understands that it is 'a version of my past, but one chosen by Ben' (Watson: 42). It is a version in which he has erased all her achievements; the novel she has written, her child and her friendships with other women. We learn that she has a PhD, but her husband tells her: 'You don't do anything. ... You don't need to. I earn a good enough wage' (Watson: 22).

While Christine experiences Ben as a stranger, he appears to be caring and concerned for her needs: '... don't worry ... I'll look after you. I'll always look after you. You'll be fine. Trust me' (Watson: 17). In that

attentiveness he infantilises her, posting instructions for simple domestic tasks and requiring her to carry a mobile phone that connects her to him constantly. She slowly comes to recognize: 'I am an adult, but a damaged one ... I am vulnerable as a child' (Watson: 30). Christine's male psychiatrist makes similar reassurances, and in the same language: 'Don't worry ... Trust me' (Watson: 28). Like Megan's psychotherapist in *The Girl on the Train*, he is another male figure who raises suspicions, in both texts the narrative tension derives from the uncertainty of who it is who can be trusted. It is only through her own writing, in assuming her own voice, that Christine can begin to recover. She is encouraged to write a journal by the psychiatrist, and in writing she recognizes: 'The only truth I have is what is written in this journal. Written by me. I must remember that. Written by me' (Watson: 174). The journal is a space in which she can develop her own version of events and take control over her own narrative: '... I am able to give myself a narrative, a life ... I can continue to use it, to tell my story, my autobiography' (Watson: 286). The first entry is written in capital letters: 'DON'T TRUST BEN' (Watson: 42).

At the novel's denouement, the apparently caring husband turns vicious; it finally emerges that he was responsible for Christine's amnesia following a brutal beating. The narrative of the caring husband who turns violent is a reliable trope of these narratives but is here complicated by the fact that Ben is (literally) two different men; 'Ben' has assumed the persona of her husband. The anxieties of the novel are not only about the physical violence that Christine has suffered, but also about the psychological damage that has been inflicted; she recognizes that 'his abuse is not only physical' (Watson: 331) and that she has been coercively controlled. There is a subtext here; Christine's fear is centred on the evil actions of one man, but he embodies an extreme of what marriage can do to women. Christine's past has been erased and she has become a person that she does not recognize, a blandly middle-class woman, entirely dependent on her husband. She remembers that she was once an active feminist; there is a sharp awareness and some shame in the recognition that she herself is now among the abused women: 'I remembered how I had always looked down on women who found themselves with husbands who beat them and stayed put ... They were weak I thought' (Watson: 325). Christine comes to recognize that she too has been subject to, in the Crown Prosecution's terms, 'a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent'.

Elizabeth Haynes' 2011 debut novel *Into the Darkest Corner* has a cover endorsement from S.J. Watson, confirming its place in the genre. *Into the Darkest Corner* is a vivid account of domestic violence in the form of a

thriller. As a former police intelligence officer, Haynes would likely be familiar with legal definitions of domestic abuse; the novel however precedes any legal definition of coercive control and Hayne's website makes no reference to it.⁷ Nevertheless, the narrative of a developing relationship and a subsequent escalation of abuse precisely follows Monkton Smith's stages that lead to the murder of an intimate partner. The male protagonist, Lee Brightman, incrementally distances the heroine Catherine from her friendship group and professional life and comes to exert control over her, a control which extends beyond the period of their relationship. Catherine, like Lily Button and the second Mrs de Winter, is, as an only child and an orphan, isolated, and vulnerable.

The thriller elements are prefigured in the opening of the novel which presents a transcript of a court case in which Lee is questioned about his violence towards Catherine. In the witness box he constructs Catherine as an out of control and paranoid woman, just as Maxim de Winter, Harry of *The First Wife* and Tom of *The Girl on a Train* represented their wives. Catherine is described in court by Brightman as jealous, emotionally unstable and violent towards him and to herself: 'she had some emotional problems. ... she had suffered from anxiety ... Her friends had told me that she had cut herself in the past' (Haynes 2011: 2). The next section of the novel confirms Lee's guilt and establishes that he has a record of murderous violence towards women. A flashback to a date four years before the trial depicts his beating and brutal murder of another young woman, Naomi. Lee's initial charm and murderous duplicity are evident in Naomi's dying thoughts: 'she was going to die now— ... at the hands of the only man who had ever really loved her and shown her kindness' (Haynes 2011: 9).

The narrative then moves forward by six years, to Catherine's first person narration of her fragile new life in the aftermath of her relationship with Brightman; she is working in a dull office job in a new city, too frightened to go to the office party, anxious in open spaces and cautious on public transport. As in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, the choppy narrative structure and fractured chronology heightens the tension as the reader is required to make the connections between the account of a grisly murder, Catherine's fragility and the court case. Another flashback moves Catherine's story back to her first encounter with Lee Brightman on a night out with her women friends. She has been drinking, is dressed seductively in 'a fitted satin red dress and cherry-red silk shoes' (Haynes 2011: 11). She is a sexually active, confident young woman, with a strong friendship group, who unapologetically enjoys drinking, dancing and sex: 'Nothing wrong with it of course, I was just enjoying myself while I could' (Haynes 2011: 18). Catherine has a fantasy of

⁷ www.elizabeth-haynes.com

‘finding some dark corner of the club and being fucked against a wall’ (Haynes 2011: 13)⁸. Immediately after this fantasy is expressed the narration fasts forward again to four years later, in which Catherine is anxiously barricading her flat against intrusion.

In the early sections of the narrative Catherine seems to conform (as does Rachel of *The Girl on the Train*) to the characterization of a paranoid and unstable young woman. She manifests symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; she spends hours checking the door locks, and ensuring that the ‘curtains in the lounge and in the dining room ... open to exactly the right width every day or I can’t come back in the flat again’ (Haynes 2011: 130). It becomes evident as the plot unfolds that this obsessive attention to the details of her security is an attempt to exert some kind of control in the aftermath of a traumatic event:

I took control, I controlled every moment of my day, timing things to the second, counting my steps., planning my cups of tea; it gave me purpose, gave me a reason to put one foot in front of the other. (Haynes 2011: 210)

The relationship with Brightman begins as an intense romance, but, like her predecessors Lily and Christine, Catherine is increasingly infantilised in her relationship as he steadily erodes her independence and friendship network. Her professional ambition is also curbed by Brightman, she is clearly respected in her workplace, and is offered a job in New York but, with his encouragement, gives it up in favour of routine work. Like Lily, she initially sees her lover as a protector, ‘how small and safe I felt’ (Haynes 2011: 33). Catherine’s feelings for Brightman become more ambivalent as he continues to curtail her independence and to exert control over her: ‘Despite how stifled I felt sometimes when he was with me, he made me feel safe at the same time’ (Haynes 2011: 89). That feeling of safety becomes more and more tenuous as Catherine finds her domestic environment subject to small changes, the cutlery moved to a different drawer, and (as in Lily’s experience) the laundry basket shifted. These are actions that Brightman does not deny, but he does not explain them either, and cumulatively they undermine Catherine’s sense of control over her domestic space, and, eventually, like Bella Manningham, her sanity: ‘Was I going mad?’ (Haynes 2011: 90). Despite her developing doubts, Brightman’s charm and good looks have convinced Catherine’s friends that he is a loving man, as she is reassured by one of them: ‘I’m sure he’s just being protective of you. ... he loves you, he really does’ (Haynes 2011: 174). Her friends contribute to her sense of doubting her

⁸ This is a fantasy that the protagonist of the later novel *Apple Tree Yard* (Doughty 2013) acts upon.

own experience in their disbelief and their conviction, fuelled by Brightman, that she is mentally ill.

As the sexual relationship between them edges into control over her, Catherine comes to resent Lee: 'I felt angry without really knowing why. It was the feeling that Lee was *taking over*. ... I ended up feeling like a guest in my own home' (Haynes 2011: 131). With her friends convinced by his version of events, she is totally isolated: 'there was nobody left now. Nobody at all. It was just him and me' (Haynes 2011: 212). As the control and violence escalate, Brightman blames Catherine for his behaviour and claims to be her protector:

Don't make me do that again ... It's for your own safety. There are some really dangerous people out there. I'm the only one who's looking out for you, you know that, don't you? So make it easy for yourself and do as you're told. (Haynes 2011: 215)

As she enjoys a night out with friends she begins to remember her life without him: 'For a moment, I was back to being on my own, the way things were, when I could dance however I liked, talk to anyone, flirt, chat ...' (Haynes 2011: 187), only to realize that Brightman is observing her. That sense of constant surveillance persists throughout the novel, even after Catherine has left the relationship and their shared city: 'I just felt as though I was being watched the whole time, every minute of every day' (Haynes 2011: 230).

Haynes was a professional police intelligence analyst, and the novel often assumes the air of a police procedural. Haynes is clear about police failures in pursuing crimes against women, and the narrative is withering about the lack of support for victims of domestic violence. As Catherine leaves hospital she is interviewed by the police: 'When they did let me out, they were supposed to sort me out with counselling, but it never happened' (Haynes 2011: 119). Brightman himself is dismissively sanguine when Catherine threatens to call the police: 'Most likely, they might send someone round to take a statement, then it would get filed and nothing would happen' (Haynes 2011: 221). Like Rachel, Catherine is disbelieved, by her friendship group and by the police; the woman officer from the Public Protection Unit discounts her concerns and the evidence that Brightman has discovered her new location. The novel culminates in a violent beating which puts Catherine in hospital and leads to the court case which began the novel.

The violence from Brightman is not the only male violence Catherine encounters in the novel, in her new life she is assaulted by a male colleague, but in this instance she is fuelled by rage: 'Somewhere inside me, the fear

had been taken over by fury' (Haynes 2011: 44). Catherine does eventually get some support from a woman police officer from the Domestic Abuse office and, together, they bring Brightman to justice, not only for the violence against Catherine but also for the murder of Naomi and for attacks against his next victim, her friend Sylvia. Conveniently, Catherine's new and attractive male neighbour is a clinical psychologist, who noting her compulsive tendencies, arranges for her to have the treatment that she needs to heal. As the novel ends, Catherine and Sylvia tentatively establish a measure of solidarity as, preparing to give evidence against Brightman, they each defiantly apply a slash of bright red lipstick, an echo of the red dress and shoes of her former life.

Fiona Barton's 2016 *The Widow* is an unusual novel for the genre in that it deals with the experience of an older and long married woman, but its narrative follows very much the same trajectory of a woman steadily undermined by a male partner. The narrative deals with a toxic marriage in which Jean Taylor is, like her younger counterparts, progressively and decisively infantilised by her husband, Glen. The novel opens in the aftermath of Glen's death in what appears to be a traffic accident, but Jean's response is not the conventional reaction of a loving wife: 'I was glad he'd gone. No more of his nonsense' (Barton 2016: 12). What that euphemistic 'non-sense' entails is the central hermeneutic of the narrative. This is another fractured narrative, with the focus shifting between Jean's first person account of events, the reportage of a woman journalist and a police account of a child abduction and investigation.

Jean first meets Glen at seventeen; he appears to be the ideal husband, good looking, with a job in a bank, and solicitous of her needs: 'He was so protective, picking a seat for me in the pub ... and ordering for me at restaurants ...' (Barton 2016: 15). While that protectiveness is initially reassuring 'It felt so safe being loved by Glen' (Barton 2016: 18), it becomes controlling as Jean is increasingly isolated from her family and few friends. Glen resents her relationship with her mother, disapproves of her friendships with her work colleagues and encourages her to withdraw into their marriage: 'he liked to keep things private ... we kept ourselves to ourselves' (Barton 2016: 49). The control that Glen exerts over her is dripped in small clues: 'He didn't like any sort of mess' (Barton 2016: 11), he is demanding in his expectations of domestic labour: 'Glen liked things neat. ... He liked it nice' (Barton 2016: 17). If Jean challenges Glen, he assumes a silent aggression: 'He would go quiet if I went against him. I hated that' (Barton 2016: 15). She recognizes that this passive aggression has the potential to become violent: 'He was crowding the kitchen with his accusations, his anger. His eyes were dead, as if he didn't know me. I thought he was going to hit me' (Barton 2016: 73).

Jean learns to keep her silence, and not to question Glen's late night use of the computer or the lies that he asks her to make on his behalf. In order to cope with the erosion of her self, Jean assumes a persona, 'Jeanie', who is a performative good wife: 'She bumbled on with her life, cooking tea and making the beds. ... She stood by the man she married' (Barton 2016: 71); Jeanie is sustained by anti-depressants.

Jean has been silenced by her husband: 'I've never been able to tell anyone. Glen said that was best' (Barton 2016: 13). Glen's court case however brings Jean to the attentions of the press, and into contact with a range of professional women, a newspaper journalist, Kate, the police psychologist Fleur, a family liaison officer, Ali and a Detective Inspector, Dawn, each of whom underline the smallness of Jean's domestic world. With Glen's death Jean finds, if not quite her own voice, that the reporter Kate is a means by which she can recount her own narrative. Glen, it becomes clear, is responsible for the abduction and murder of a young child. In the words of the police officer, he is one of the 'shifting population of ... paedophiles and rapists who disguised themselves as friendly neighbours in unsuspecting communities' (Barton 2016: 44). *The Widow* is about the banality of evil, as the Police Detective arrives to arrest Glen, his first thought is of how ordinary he seems: 'He looks like the bloke next door ... You hope you'll be able to see the evil shining out of them ... But evil was a slippery substance, only glimpsed occasionally and all the more horrifying for that' (Barton 2016: 103). Jean is well aware of how 'slippery' her husband is, his treatment of her is corrosive and she has had regular 'glimpses' of Glen's potential for evil. Jean Taylor nonetheless exacts her revenge, in the final paragraphs of the novel she quietly, but very deliberately, pushes him under a bus.

It is not only male protagonists who are guilty of gaslighting intimate partners in the domestic thriller. Sutton has suggested that *Gone Girl* was instrumental in defining what's become known as 'domestic noir' (Sutton 2018: 42); however, Flynn's novel is distinctive in that it inverts the generic trope of a male figure controlling a woman. Amy is the 'Gone Girl' of the title who uses her considerable cunning to undermine her husband in order to forcibly reinstate her marriage; the apparent female victim is revealed to be a murderous manipulator of men. In Murphy's description: '*Gone Girl* begins as a kind of suburban-set Bluebeard narrative for the twenty-first century: an innocent wife is terrorised by a violent and deceptive husband. However, it is also, crucially, a desolate story of mutual marital unhappiness' (Murphy 2018: 163). As the narrative develops it becomes evident that the wife, Amy, is by no means innocent. She is deceptive, and eventually violent, and it is her husband, Nick, who is being terrorized. As Wilson has pointed out, *Gone Girl*

reverses the plot of du Maurier's *Rebecca*, in that 'rather than the husband killing his demonic wife and dumping her body in a boat, it is the demonic Amy who avenges herself on Nick, and gets away with murder' (Wilson 2016: 48).

Gone Girl is another fractured narrative, structurally daring in presenting its narrative through alternate points of view, beginning with the husband, Nick's, account of his wife's disappearance. The narration is then taken over by Amy's journal which recounts their meeting and courtship. Amy is not only an unreliable narrator, but there are several different versions of Amy. The voice of 'Diary Amy' is a persona constructed in order to fit 'the news media's "ideal" victim' (Murphy 2018: 158) but this version of events is rapidly undercut when 'Actual Amy' takes over the narration and reveals Amy to be a mistress of manipulation. An earlier incarnation of Amy is the 'Amazing Amy' created by her parents in book form, a character who will not allow for any flaws or failure. 'Actual Amy' is prepared to commit murder, theft and blackmail in order to sustain the persona of 'Amazing Amy' and to perpetuate the illusion of a happy marriage; 'Actual Amy' can be read as a twisted parodic version of the ideal contemporary young woman. Murphy's reading of Flynn's women characters is also true of many of the women in these narratives:

For Flynn's women, internal and external pressures are intrinsically related. If they are their own worst enemies, it is in part because they inhabit a world in which women are so frequently objectified, abused and patronised that they cannot help but fall into self-harming and self-defeating behaviours, despite their obvious intelligence and obsessive self-scrutiny. (Murphy 2018: 165)

The woman protagonist, Maggie Rose, of Sharon Bolton's⁹ 2016 novel *Daisy in Chains* takes those 'self-harming behaviours' to extremes, precisely because she has been 'objectified, abused and patronised'. *Daisy in Chains* (which comes with a cover endorsement from Paula Hawkins) is among the most violent and intricately plotted of these narratives; like *Gone Girl* it inverts the gender of the expected victim and perpetrator, and the character of Maggie shares Amy's multiple selves. She too is highly intelligent, a crime writer and a criminal lawyer, who, as Amy does, uses her cunning to exact revenge on a man.

As in *Into the Darkest Corner*, the narrative develops through a collage of different kinds of writing, letters, blog entries, transcripts of psychiatric reports, and police procedural notes, in which, much as in a television crime drama, the reader is required to connect the multiple narrative strands. The novel opens with a love letter from Hamish Wolfe, a prisoner

⁹ Sharon Bolton's first novels were published under the gender-neutral name S. J. Bolton.

in Parkhurst prison, followed by another letter protesting his innocence of serial murder. The narrative proper begins in a bleak and windswept landscape on the Bristol Channel, where Maggie, the recipient of the letters, is walking. In a scene of high drama, she is heroically involved in the rescue of a dog named Daisy, a name which resonates throughout the novel. The dog is owned by Hamish, and it is his mother who confronts Maggie to assertively proclaim his innocence. Sandra Wolfe appears to be deranged in her insistence that her son is not guilty; the detective in Hamish's case warns Maggie that Sandra may be unstable and that the group campaigning for his release are 'nutters and misfits ... misguided individuals' (Bolton 2016: 17). It seems that Maggie is threatened and vulnerable, she is perceived by the detective, Peter, to be 'childlike' and 'fragile' as he warns her to secure the house (Bolton 2016: 16).

It is Hamish and his mother who are disbelieved and constructed as untrustworthy; the police and the media cast him as an arch manipulator, the male and female psychiatrists who assess him find him to be 'completely lacking in empathy' and 'uncooperative, angry and aggressive' (Bolton 2016: 105). Hamish's smile is described as 'a smirk of pure cunning' (Bolton 2016: 131); his villainy seems indisputable. The narrative trajectory appears to be that Maggie, with her legal skills and intelligence, and Peter as detective will confirm his guilt, uncover two missing bodies and find romance with one another. Much of the narration is from Maggie's point of view, and much of the exposition is written as a draft of Maggie's new novel.

As Maggie and Peter put the case together, it emerges that all the victims were young women who were overweight and also that Hamish was once a member of 'the Fat Club' at university, a group of male students who seduced overweight women, and filmed them in sexual acts without their knowledge. Among those women was the mysterious Daisy, who has vanished; Maggie suggests to the detective that she too may have been one of Wolfe's victims. In an interview with Hamish as his lawyer Maggie comments: 'A woman scorned has a long memory' (Bolton 2016: 139), and that is the crux of the novel. It is not until the final chapters that it is revealed that 'Maggie' is, like the narrative she has constructed (both in her novel and in the courts), a fiction. It is Maggie who has murdered the women and framed Hamish to avenge the humiliation and betrayal of her previous self, as Daisy. She relentlessly frames her quarry, using Hamish's car to transport bodies, breaking into his house and leaving incriminating evidence on his computer. As a crime writer, Maggie is well versed in the conventions of the genre, and makes use of them to painstakingly cover her own tracks and to mislead the police (and the reader). Once the narrative has been seized

from her, she kills herself by throwing herself off the same cliffs that opened the novel. Murphy has argued of Gillian Flynn's work that: 'Flynn's fiction has so far revolved around [the] conviction that women have the same right to be portrayed as unsympathetic, morally complex and unabashedly villainous characters as their male counterparts' (Murphy 2018: 159); Maggie/Daisy joins Amy as an outright, and morally complex, female villain.

Uneasily poised between genre and literary fiction (many of the reviews of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* suggested that Flynn and Hawkins went beyond genre fiction), these narratives share a sophisticated narrative plot structure, playing with unreliable narrators, different versions of events and shifting timescales. Their heroines are intelligent, capable, and often professionally successful women; they do not fit neatly into the roles of wife and mother, and all, in some way, challenge traditional feminine ideals. As Wilson puts it: 'Often bruised and embattled, these girls are the new brand of femininity, out of tune with traditional domestic models and ill at ease in the home' (Wilson 2016: 47). Sally Munt, in her reading of interwar women crime writers, argues that 'these fictions can be read as offering a panacea to the sense of social displacement women—whether feminist or not—experience within a society which (still) fixes them within a matrix of enmity, competition and fragmentation' (Munt 1994: 9). The women in contemporary crime narratives are regularly literally displaced, moving to another location in order to escape the enmity of a man and to pick up the fragments of their lives (Wilson 2016: 48).

Jacqueline Rose however, in a review of *The Girl on a Train* and *Gone Girl*, condemned the genre as misogynist, arguing, that despite some feminist gloss:

This feminism can only incriminate the male species – and it is always by implication the whole male species – by offering the woman as pure victim, leaving no other solution for the woman than to enact, make her very own, the violence that is meant to belong to men alone. (Rose 2015)

While it is the case that the majority of these women characters (importantly, not all) are victimized, they are by no means passive or 'pure' victims; each acquires some form of agency. Maggie Rose and Amy set out to directly incriminate a man, but all the protagonists experience a form of vengeful rage and exert their powers to bring abusive and traitorous men to some form of justice. The domestic thriller may not necessarily be feminist, Amy uses her considerable intelligence to reclaim her husband

and to reinstate her marriage, Rachel may finally vanquish the controlling Tom with the support of her rival Anna, but there is no suggestion that this will lead to a lasting solidarity. The crimes of abuse in these novels are inflicted by individual men on individual women, there is little sense of a systemic abuse in the patriarchal order. Nonetheless, these narratives cannot simply be dismissed as undermining of women; they are evidence of a deep disquiet about contemporary masculinity. Their protagonists discover that not only is there a fine line between a passionate male lover and a violent abuser, but also that they themselves have a measure of murderous vengeance.

In her analysis of feminist and lesbian crime fictions of the late twentieth century Sally Munt has argued:

In the publication of feminist crime fiction the foregrounding of all types of crimes of exploitation against women had enabled them to be spoken in a public sphere, the expression not being obviously mediated by those potential perpetrators ... the position of the gaze ... shifts from being held by the perpetrator to the victim. The politics of the gaze is openly explored in feminist crime fiction, showing how it is not just sexed and gendered, but also implicated within racial paradigms. Because this genre is so crucially concerned with perception, this allows for a degree of reflective interrogation as to the mechanisms of scrutiny. At a crude level, instead of being titillated by the abused female body, we are inscribed within it, and allowed revenge. (Munt 1994: 198)

This was written in 1994, over two decades before this genre was a recognized phenomenon; the concerns that Munt identifies have moved into the mainstream of popular fiction and enabled them 'to be spoken in a public sphere'. These may not be strictly feminist crime novels, but, in their largely first person women narrators, they do 'inscribe' the reader within a female gaze. The genre of 'domestic noir' directly addresses crimes against women, including child abuse, domestic violence, intimidation, coercive control, and was doing so before psychological abuse or coercive control were recognized as criminal offences. And all the protagonists are allowed to exact an often brutal retribution; each of these women can stand with Bella Manningham of *Gas Light*, as finally triumphant in their revenge on a male abuser: '... because I am mad I have betrayed you and because I am mad I am rejoicing in my heart—without a shred of pity—without a shred of regret—watching you go with glory in my heart' (Hamilton 1939: 83).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Works Cited

- Arter, Danny (2016), 'Playing It Straight: Cover Conventions in "Grip Lit"', *The Bookseller*, 12 September, at www.thebookseller.com.
- Barr, Emily (2011), *The First Wife*, London: Headline Review.
- Barton, Fiona (2016), *The Widow*, London: Corgi Books.
- Beaman, Sally (2007), 'Rebecca', in Helen Taylor (ed.), *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, London: Virago, pp. 47–60.
- Bolton, Sharon (2016), *Daisy in Chains*, London: Bantam Press.
- Crouch, Julia (2013), 'Genre Bender', 25 August, at www.Juliacrouch.co.uk/blog.
- Dorward, Jamie (2016), 'Paula Hawkins: An Unexpected Ending to Writer's Dark Journey', *The Observer*, 2 October, p. 34.
- Doughty, Louise (2013), *Apple Tree Yard*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Du Maurier, Daphne (1992), *Rebecca*, London: Arrow Books.
- Hamilton, Patrick (1939), *Gas Light: A Victorian Thriller in Three Acts*, London: Constable and Company.
- Hannah, Sophie (2013), 'Get a Grip', *The Guardian*, 30 January, p. 21.
- Hawkins, Paula (2016), *The Girl on the Train*, London: Black Swan.
- Haynes, Elizabeth (2011), *Into the Darkest Corner*, Brighton: Myriad Editions.
- Modleski, Tania (1982), *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, London: Methuen.
- Monckton Smith, Jane (2020), 'Intimate Partner Femicide: Using Foucauldian Analysis to Track an Eight Stage Progression to Homicide', *Violence Against Women* 26:11, pp. 1267–85.
- Munt, Sally (1994), *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, London: Routledge.
- Murphy, Bernice M (2018), "'We Will Have a Happy Marriage If It Kills Him": Gillian Flynn and the Rise of Domestic Noir', in Bernice M. Murphy and Stephen Matterson (eds), *Twenty-First Century Popular Fiction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 158–69.
- Palmer, Jerry (1991), *Potboilers: Methods, Concepts and Case Studies in Popular Fiction*, London: Routledge.
- Plain, Gill (2020), 'Gender and Sexuality', in Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King and Andres Pepper (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, London: Routledge, pp. 102–10.
- Rose, Jacqueline (2015), 'Corkscrew in the Neck', *London Review of Books* 37:17, pp. 25–6.
- Sutton, Henry (2018), 'Gone Genre: How the Academy Came Running and Discovered Nothing Was as It Seemed', in Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (eds),

- The New Face of Twenty-First Century Crime Fiction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53–70.
- Watson, S.J. (2011), *Before I go to sleep*, London: Transworld Pub.
- Wilson, Frances (2016), ‘When Harry Met Fifty Shades: What Literary Hits Have in Common’, *New Statesman*, 9–15 December, pp. 46–8.
- Wiseman, Eva (2017), ‘The Woman on the Train with a Book with “Girl” in the Title ...’, *The Observer*, 8 January.