



Crime has a PR component: Public relations in U.S. mystery novels

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Public relations
Popular culture
Fiction and representation
Mystery genre
Crime fiction

ABSTRACT

Qualitative content analysis of 74 novels featuring public relations characters distributed in the United States demonstrates that, rather than attempting to replicate reality, the mystery genre reflects debates about such issues as honesty, confidentiality, and the relative value of negative publicity. PR practitioners fit into all of the conventional mystery character roles, but particularly the role of sleuth, where access to information and powerful people allows them to solve the mystery but also sometimes forces them to choose between the client/employer and the public interest. The study confirms Fitch's (2015) contention that popular culture representations of public relations are best understood in their narrative and generic context.

Public relations is frequently referenced in popular culture (Tavcar, 1993), and in a scholarly analysis of public relations in film and fiction from 1930 to 1995, Miller (1999) argued that popular culture representations of PR did not adequately reflect the practice. Although originally conceived as an historical analysis of changes in representation over time, the study instead revealed a relatively stable set of archetypal characteristics of PR practitioners. "Readers and viewers of these stories are offered a picture of a somewhat mysterious occupation populated by unscrupulous practitioners with superiority complexes whose main goals appear to be getting their clients mentioned in the news media, duping the public and their clients, and gaining power" (p. 24). Since then, scholars have examined representations of PR on television (Fitch, 2015; Kinsky (2012)); in movies (Ames, 2010; Lambert & White, 2012; Lee, 2001, 2009; Tilson, 2003; Tsetsura et al., 2015); or both (Johnston, 2010; Saltzman (2012)). Amassing a sample of more than 325 films and television programs (1901–2011), Saltzman (2012): 1) concluded, "The images of the PR practitioner are far more varied and even more positive than previously thought." Generally, though, scholars have found that popular depictions of public relations characters are sometimes misleading or even outright offensive, especially regarding women practitioners (Johnston, 2010; Lambert & White, 2012).

Fitch (2015: 608, 612) argues, however, that "these understandings of the 'reality' of the industry are constituted within the field's dominant paradigm, which constructs public relations as an ethical and strategic management profession." Her analysis of Nan Flanagan, a character who drives the campaign for equal rights for vampires in the HBO series "True Blood," demonstrates that the fictional representation of PR "cannot be understood in isolation from its narrative and generic

context, or as a representation of the 'reality' of the public relations industry." She suggests that public relations scholars should develop a more sophisticated understanding of popular culture representation. This study therefore attempts to push beyond judging popular culture portrayals as good/bad or realistic/unrealistic, instead asking, as did Tsetsura et al. (2015: 656, emphasis in original), "how public relations characters fit into the plot." This question will be examined through qualitative content analysis in the context of an important genre of fiction in the United States, the mystery novel.

1. Literature review

Popular culture, although often viewed with disdain, is important for public relations scholars to study. Mukerji and Schudson (1986: 47) assert, "Much more than with most objects of study, a leading question with popular culture has traditionally been whether it deserves serious consideration at all." Their review includes important scholarship on pop culture in anthropology, history, and sociology, which has usually defined popular culture as mass culture. For example, Gans (1999: 29, 76 emphasis in original, 91) notes that pop culture has been criticized for being "mass-produced by profit-minded entrepreneurs solely for the gratification of a paying audience," debasing high culture and "depleting its reservoir of talent," negatively impacting its audiences, and "creating a passive audience peculiarly responsive to the techniques of mass persuasion." But, he says, "the popular arts are, on the whole, user-oriented and exist to satisfy audience values and wishes." Art and entertainment "must meet standards of form and substance which grow out of the values of the society and the needs and characteristics of its

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102396>

Received 2 April 2023; Received in revised form 12 October 2023; Accepted 11 November 2023

Available online 20 November 2023

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members.” Because popular culture is embedded in its social context, exploring it can offer insights beyond understanding the art itself.

Although one of the most visible (Anderson, 2015) and popular (Yucesoy et al., 2018) genres in the United States, the mystery novel has also been a frequent target of criticism. Also called crime fiction or detective fiction, the genre has been labeled formulaic and repetitive, relying on plots and puzzles rather than “rhythm, texture or characterization” (Roth, 1995: 12). “You cannot read such a book,” Wilson (1944) wrote in the *New Yorker*, “you run through it to see the problem worked out...” The genre is accused of upholding the social status quo with “little or no investigation or implication regarding the social causes of crime” (Goldman, 2011: 261). However, Goldman (2011) demonstrates that, although it is true that most mysteries focus on the resolution of one crime, taken as a whole the mystery genre includes significant social criticism, by featuring bumbling or corrupt police officials or detectives who let criminals go free, for example. As to the formulaic nature of mysteries, Cawelti (2004) points out that Shakespeare used the conventions of his time and that even James Joyce’s *Ulysses* depends on the formulas it inverts and parodies. Beginning in the mid-20th century, the mystery genre began to converge more closely with mainstream literary fiction, with greater character development and numerous experiments with breaking the formulas and conventions (Cohen, 2000).

1.1. Conventions of mystery fiction

An analysis of how public relations characters fit into the plot of mystery books begins with understanding the conventions of the genre. Literary conventions, Cawelti (2004: 12) explains, are “principles for the selection of certain plots, characters, and settings” which function as contracts between writer and readers, essentially establishing the rules of fair play (see Hoppenstand, 1987). For example, in mysteries the detective and the reader should have access to the same evidence, the problem must have a rational solution, and crime should not be rewarded. There are variations by subgenre – including the thriller, police procedurals, spy and gangster stories, noir, hard-boiled detectives, and literary mysteries – but this analysis focuses on the detective story in which the investigator is an amateur sleuth, because the vast majority of the novels in the sample fell into this category. (There were a very few exceptions, such as a science fiction/fantasy crossover [Luoma, 2005] and a mystery/horror story [Fowler, 1992], but not enough to constitute a separate category of analysis.)

The basic formula established in the classic detective story consists of an unsolved crime, an investigation conducted by a detective who finds clues, and announces and explains the solution, and a denouement which includes the criminal’s apprehension (Cawelti, 1976). Mystery authors have played with this formula over many decades, and readers have learned to expect red herrings, locked rooms, and rules of thumb, such as “the initially most obvious suspect will be innocent,” “if something strikes the detective as not right, it will turn out to be a significant clue,” and “the culprit will be among the known suspects,” Goldman (2011: 266) notes. Relevant conventions for this study cluster around the characters – the victim, criminal, detective, sidekick, suspects, and witness/bystanders – discussed in more detail below.

2. Method

In total the author read and took notes on 74 mystery novels (see Appendix A). Mystery novels for this analysis were identified primarily through the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture database.¹ The initial search in 2016 for “public relations” in the “mystery novel” category yielded more than 100 books. On closer examination some were miscategorized (either there was not a public relations character or the story was not a mystery) and were removed from the sample. Books

with only very minor characters in public relations were also removed. Some novels in the database were series books in which the same character reappeared, and these were read only until saturation was reached in terms of public relations content. Notes were taken on qualifications of the PR character, personality traits exhibited or described by other characters, and PR strategies and tactics employed by the character, in addition to a plot synopsis.

This study employed qualitative content analysis (QCA) to investigate the role of public relations characters in mystery fiction. Importantly, QCA focuses on latent meaning, which requires an understanding of context – reading an entire passage or publication, for example, rather than a single sentence or paragraph as is typical of studies of manifest meaning through quantitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Although QCA is best conducted by multiple scholars to ensure validity of the findings, Schreier (2012) concludes that it can be effectively used by a single scholar. Given the size of the sample and the length of time required to locate, read, and take notes on each book, this study was best suited to an individual researcher. To address the potential issue of reliability in this case, the author followed Schreier’s (2012) recommendation of proceeding in a systematic manner and making all steps transparent to readers.

QCA approaches data using categories that derive from research questions to limit the exploration and reach depth in explanation (McIntosh and Cuklanz, 2017). The first step is therefore to select **dimensions**, the main categories on which the analysis will focus (Schreier, 2012). Because the purpose of this study is to understand the role of public relations characters within the plots of mystery novels, the dimensions were defined by the conventions of the genre. Therefore, the first step was to place the public relations characters into one of the mutually exclusive categories of victim, detective, sidekick, witness/-bystander, suspect, or criminal based on the ending of the book. Thus, a character could begin as “suspect” but if revealed to be actually guilty of the crime, the final categorization is “criminal.” The dimensions with examples of the characters are described below.

The next step is to develop **subcategories**, in this case derived inductively based on the data in the novels. That is, the reasons that public relations characters fit into each conventional role were not apparent prior to reading the novels, and therefore had to be generated from the source material. The researcher used a strategy of subsumption, which Schreier (2012) describes as examining relevant passages for pertinent concepts and turning each new concept into a subcategory until no new ones emerge. Additionally, a “back-and-forth between what can be seen in the text” and “the work of other researchers” (McIntosh and Cuklanz, 2017: 260) can help to elicit deeper understanding. In this analysis, the procedure consisted of defining the conventional role of each mystery character, then listing paraphrases of all reasons that a PR character was said or shown within the text to be appropriate to the role, and collapsing the reasons into more general subcategories (Schreier, 2012).

The final step is analysis of the data, which consisted of the notes taken about the public relations characters in each book. Because the books were read over a period of years, reviewing the notes together allowed the researcher to search for patterns based on the subcategories. “The perception of [a] pattern begins the process of thematic analysis” (Boyatzis, 1998: 3), the purposes of which are to identify themes that describe and organize the observations and ultimately to interpret the phenomenon. During the process of analysis, McIntosh and Cuklanz (2017: 266) explain, the researcher should consider why these observations are important, providing a new way to look at the subject with the potential of contributing to understanding of “how meanings are generated and circulated.”

3. Roles of characters in mystery novels and reasons public relations is suitable for the role

This section describes the results of the first two steps of QCA. It

¹ <https://www.ijpc.org/page/introdatabase.htm>

begins with dimensions, identifying and describing public relations characters in each conventional role of the mystery genre, applying the “back-and-forth” comparison with other texts recommended by [McIntosh and Cuklanz \(2017: 260\)](#) to elicit deeper understanding of each dimension. Then it lists the subcategories derived by subsumption: a bulleted list provides the reasons that public relations characters were able to fulfill each of the roles as defined by mystery conventions.

Victim: Public relations characters were victims only a handful of times. Billie Murphy, who works for the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, accidentally hears information about a racketeering scheme and has to go on the run to avoid being killed by criminals (Green, 2004). Bonnie Vincent, a public relations representative for an accounting company, is killed in a case of domestic violence (Reichardt & Oscar, 2013), and Lucy Preston similarly is threatened by a former love interest (Thomas, 1996). Jason Whitely, internal communications director at a law firm, was the victim of an employee at a PR agency because she believed he murdered her daughter (Lessner, 2013). In some instances, PR characters are attacked or threatened because of their investigations, but their primary role is that of sleuth (see for example Bunkley, 1997; de Beauvoir, 2015; Pentecost, 1983; Strand, 2013; Stuyck, 1996; Taichert, 2005). In only one case was the character attacked specifically because of her role as a public relations person.

[Auden \(1948\)](#) argued that mystery story victims have to be bad enough to throw suspicion onto a number of other characters, but good enough that people want to solve the crime. None of the victims in this sample can be described in this way. Public relations characters are not frequently considered suitable mystery novel victims, and when they were victims, it was typically for reasons unrelated to their jobs, with one exception: they are a threat to the criminal because they have or seek secret information.

Sleuth: The largest group of characters fell into the dimension of sleuth, an amateur detective who lacks the resources of the police or a private investigator but gathers clues, informally interrogates witnesses and suspects, and attempts to deduce a solution. Fully one-third of the novels in the sample had a PR character who was a sleuth, including several recurring characters. Occasionally, the PR character is in the right place at the right time to help solve a mystery (Box, 1954; Douglas, 1993), as when Barbara Simons won a ride-along with the police and happened to be with them when they received the call about the murder of her former boss (Epstein, 1997), or when the FBI recruits an art museum PR executive to help capture an art thief (Wilde, 2004). Sometimes the PR characters are protecting themselves. Gil Hopkins, a movie studio publicist, once chose not to reveal what he knew about an unsolved murder and now must solve the case before a reporter does (Abbott, 2007), and Lucille Anderson stumbles on a dead body but doesn't tell anyone, and then looks suspicious when a reporter tells the police (Bastion, 2009). PR characters also try to solve crimes to help friends, clients, or family members who are victims or under suspicion for crimes (Epstein, 1996; Grant, 2013; McNamara, 2008; Strand, 2011; Stuyck, 1995, 1997; Taichert, 2004, 2005, 2008; Wilber, 2003; Zellerbach, 2011), or because a crime threatens the success of a client/employer, especially by negative publicity (Carlson, 2012, 2013, 2014; de Beauvoir, 2015; Douglas, 1992, 2006; Morgan, 1972, 2008; Nathan, 1994; Stuyck, 1996; see also the series books described below). Finally, the PR character at times becomes a sleuth because they learn of a misdeed on the part of the client or employer (Bretting, 2014; Bunkley, 1997; Larsen, 1997; Ryan, 2009; Strand, 2011; Wilber, 2003; Womack, 1990).

After a PR character has solved one case, they can become a recognized sleuth for future cases, allowing the development of a mystery series. For example, freelance PR woman Temple Barr achieves such a reputation for sleuthing that she is hired to promote a cat show because the client also needs someone to find out who is sabotaging some of the contestants (Douglas, 1994); in all there are 27 mysteries in this series. Agatha Raisin, although retired from her agency, both freelances and volunteers her combined expertise in PR and investigation in the early

part of the series (Beaton, 1998). Similarly, after he solves one crime at the research center where he works, Bert Swain is loaned part-time to a hospital to solve a murder with the help of a private investigator and then to a member of board of directors to investigate a third crime (Nathan, 1995, 2000), and freelancer Jack Lynch is called back to his former employer when the bank has a cybersecurity crisis (Womack, 1993). The long-running Julian Quist series included 16 novels, beginning with a mystery in which the criminal turned out to be the man who acted as an uncle to him after his parents were killed (Pentecost, 1971), and concluding with a story in which he decides to accept public relations work from a client specifically because he wants to investigate a death (Pentecost, 1987).

Whether an amateur, a private investigator, or a police force acting together, detectives are the center of modern crime fiction. They “discover the cause of a crime, restore order, and bring the criminal to account” ([Knight \(1983\): 267](#)). [Auden \(1948\)](#) argues that amateur sleuths are unsatisfactory detectives because they lack a motive for investigating, but also admits that they are better positioned to gain suspects' confidence than professionals.

The novels in this sample incorporated a number of reasons that PR characters could make good sleuths, including a strong motive:

- They need to get the facts in order to control the damage to the client/employer's business or reputation.
- They are often called in during crisis situations and therefore have access to information about the crime.
- They are organizational insiders and know the truth about their clients/employers.
- Their jobs require skills that are relevant to sleuthing: they are used to asking questions and are good listeners, and they know how to do research, in some cases because they are former journalists.
- They have relevant personal characteristics, including being clever, inquisitive, or “nosy,” and are persistent, like challenges, and refuse to be intimidated.

Sidekick: Sometimes the public relations character functioned as a sidekick to the detective. In one of the earliest novels in the sample, Hollywood publicist Circus Ed Haley discovers a body, calls a friend who is a private investigator, and helps him solve the crime (Dickinson, 1937). PR executives Liz Wareham (Brennan, 1993), Hallie Marsh (Zellerbach, 2009) and Jillian Hillcrest (Strand, 2012) each get involved in investigations because of personal relationships with police officers and reporters, although two of three appear in series in which the women investigate on their own in later books.

[Cawelti \(1976\)](#) describes the sidekick as a friend or assistant of the detective who is a sympathetic character but weak, lacking the detective's skills and abilities in crime solving; Goldman goes so far as to identify sidekicks as “bumbling” (2011: 268). In an analysis of gender in mystery fiction, [Craig and Cadogan \(1981: 71\)](#) suggest that very often female sidekicks, “auxiliary women detectives,” are “helpers to enterprising males,” such as a spouse (Nick and Nora in the Thin Man series) or employer (Perry Mason and Della Street), and in this sample, most of the sidekicks were, in fact women. Yet public relations sidekicks were not just window dressing; they made indispensable contributions to the case.

Based on this sample, PR characters make strong sidekicks for several reasons:

- They are curious and adept at fact-gathering.
- They have personal connections and access to inside information that the primary detective lacks.
- Clients/employers believe they can conceal information, especially from the press, and therefore share information with them.
- They are motivated to help to solve the crime in order to protect the client/employer's business or reputation.

Witness or bystander: Some public relations characters do not have a significant role in moving the plot forward. For example, a few of the novels are set at public relations agencies or in corporations with large PR staffs, so characters like Liz Stewart and Aaron Schuman (Lessner, 2013) or Grover Furlong and Tom Kennerly (Thomas, 1996) appear frequently on the fringes of the investigation, but contribute little to the resolution of the story. Peter Sargeant II offers comic relief, hired to work for a senator he's never met even though he may (or may not) be engaged to the man's daughter (Box, 1953). Sasha Borianni is the owner of a PR firm, but she is a pawn in a larger game involving her client, who ultimately solves the mystery (Thomas, 2004). NASA public relations person Margo Miller is an important character, working with a team trying to identify the criminal hacking the space agency's computers. She also gets pregnant by the astronaut who ends up being the murder victim, and she saves the narrator's life. Yet she is not a part of the murder or the solution (Chapman, 1997). American Douglas Perkins, a principal at Perkins & Tate in London, functions as the narrator who is witness to events in a series of four books (Babson, 1971, 1972, 1989, 1990); similarly, Casey O'Rourke works for a corporation with major public relations problems, but she watches events unfold rather than working to get to the bottom of them (Bowers, 1997).

Cawelti (1976: 91) defines bystanders as "those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it." Part of their function, then, is to spur the detective to solve the case to protect the innocent. But in this sample, bystanders often had useful information for the detective and therefore served as witnesses, not just filler.

Public relations characters in this sample fit the witness/bystander role for several reasons:

- Clients/employers come to them when facing a problem, including crime.
- They are given information, often in order to hush it up with the press.
- They are willing to "look the other way" to maintain the client/employer relationship.
- They are appropriate secondary characters in organizational settings.

Suspect: In a number of novels the public relations character is initially identified as a suspect, but is later cleared of wrongdoing. PR agency owner Sheridan Berk is suspected of killing her lover, the White House Chief of Staff (Mann, 1991); Katrina Campbell is accused of murdering her client, generally acknowledged to be an annoying person (Lessner, 2013); Bill Stemple is suspected of killing a secretary at an office party (Jeffries, 1964); and Agatha Raisin's store-bought quiche apparently kills the judge in a Cotswolds village cooking competition (Beaton, 1992). Movie industry publicist John Chapel (Fowler, 1992) and museum PR director Max Scofield (Childs, 2015) are likewise suspected of murder, and the entire senior management staff is under suspicion in one novel set in an agency (Brennan, 1991).

Suspects cannot be "irrelevant to the events," Rodell (1952: 42) explains: motives, alibis, and the means and opportunities of the suspects constitute the world of the mystery. In this sample public relations characters usually fell under suspicion because they had means and opportunity, such as being on the scene where the crime occurred (Childs, 2015), rather than motive for murder.

In these mystery novels, PR characters are suitable suspects for four reasons:

- They have access to crime scenes, for example because they planned the event where the murder occurs.
- They have access to victims through personal or professional relationships.
- Some characters believe that because public relations practitioners are known liars, they cannot be trusted regarding crime.

- Being a suspect gives them or their friends motivation to become an amateur sleuth.

Criminal: In several instances a public relations character is revealed as the criminal, primarily as a murderer. A healthcare specialist killed a client (Lessner, 2013) whom she believed was responsible for her daughter's death. Another PR woman kills a man connected to her former job out of self-defense (Thomas, 1996), and two characters use a position in public relations as a cover for their real jobs: criminal mastermind (Brett, 2017) and political assassin (Luoma, 2005). In one instance a publicist poisons a starlet's box of chocolate, but the publicity stunt goes wrong and he murders another character to cover his tracks (Dickson, 1934).

Criminals in detective fiction "are invisible because they are passing as ordinary persons," Roth (1995: 184) argues, and in order for the detective to match wits with the criminal, the person cannot kill randomly or without motive (Rodell, 1952). However, in most cases in this sample, a public relations career is unrelated to the motive, such as self-defense or a revenge killing. "PR people may kill stories," one character says, "but they don't kill people" (Douglas, 1993: 54).

PR characters in this sample fulfilled the criminal role for two reasons:

- The job provides a plausible reason for moving in different circles, including with powerful people or geographic locations and can serve as a front for criminal activity.
- The death is an indirect result of a publicity stunt.

3.1. PR characters operating within mystery conventions

In sum, public relations characters fit into the conventions of mystery storytelling while also sometimes challenging them. Conventions are a contract, but contracts can be renegotiated. For example, the hard-boiled detective, epitomized by Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, was traditionally misogynistic, until authors like Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton created female hard-boiled detectives (Cawelti, 2004), upending the conventions with best-selling series that opened new doors for all mystery writers. It is not surprising, then, as Cohen (2000) suggested of mysteries generally, the mystery writers in this sample were not afraid to experiment with the rules: "...readers of mysteries are prepared to be entertained by the writer who stays within [the conventions] but more entertained by one who challenges them" (31). PR characters fit some conventions and challenge others in their generic roles.

4. Discussion

This analysis has shown that the reasons that PR characters can logically fulfill the conventional roles in mystery novels are different. However, taken as a group, these reasons point to a number of recurring themes. This section describes themes that emerged after closer examination, guided by the qualitative content analysis subcategories listed above.

Sometimes public relations characters are appropriate to crime fiction for *plot-driven reasons*. They are natural participants in a story set in a corporation or political or nonprofit organization. Moreover, the job provides a plausible reason for characters to work with people in different industries and at different locations. As Sasha Solomon describes her consulting business: "Have PR, will travel" (Taichert, 2004: 491, emphasis in original). In two cases this allows the PR person to commit crimes, but more frequently, it allows the author to place an appropriate character at the crime scene – series sleuths are usually freelancers or agency employees for this reason.

But why public relations instead of, say, accountants or tax attorneys who can also have multiple clients? One reason is that PR jobs are represented as requiring many of the *skills and characteristics that are*

relevant to mystery solving. Particularly in the series books, PR characters are described as good listeners who are used to asking questions or getting information without asking directly, “sifting the truth from lies and half-truths” (Pentecost, 1976: 68). They know how to gather and assemble facts, sometimes because they are former journalists. Additionally, characteristics such as being clever and inquisitive are presented as personality traits possessed by public relations practitioners. “Nosiness—a fundamental requirement of the detective – is often considered a feminine trait” (Craig and Cadogan, 1981: 13) but is also connected to having a nose for news (Douglas, 1993). Practitioners are persistent, curious, skeptical, and like a challenge, traits that are important to all sleuths. It is not suggested that all PR people have these characteristics, but attributing them to PR characters can provide scope for investigation by an amateur sleuth. Temple Barr, for example, is presented as “a PR person with a license to snoop” (Douglas, 2006: 200).

But PR’s relevance goes deeper than skills and personality traits. The novels reveal that *crime has “a PR component”*: “Unlike a normal citizen reacting to a first exposure to murder,” Liz Wareham recalls, “my thoughts turned to public relations” (Brennan, 1991: 17). The publicity director for the city of Montréal said the mayor only noticed her “when something was going wrong. And another murder certainly qualified as being very wrong indeed” (de Beauvoir, 2015: 7). Another character mused, “It appalled her that someone had involved her company in a crime. It would be a PR issue at best” (Stand, 2013: 1839). Occasionally, the desire for publicity is even weighed as a possible motive for crime (Beaton, 1998; Morgan, 2009).

Because of this PR component, public relations characters have *access to information and people*. This might be as simple as being on the scene because they planned the event where the crime occurs, but more importantly PR characters, as the expression says, “know where the bodies are buried.” When a bank tries to bring back a former employee during a cybercrime crisis, he says, “If you want me to help you... I need to be apprised of exactly what’s been going on here” (Womack, 1993: 88). PR characters also know everything there is to know about the key players. For example, when an actress is killed in a terrorist bombing, the police question Julian Quist in hopes that he has inside information about her to determine if she was the target (Pentecost, 1984). In fact, Quist did demand to know the truth about his clients, even if only so they could produce a more satisfactory false front for them: “It was important for him to know what he had to hide and on what he could build” (Pentecost, 1971: 16).

PR characters have access to information and people for an important reason: *confidentiality*. Clients/employers expect them to keep information private; one PR character thinks they should be entitled to privileged communications like priests and lawyers (Babson, 1989). “If I’ve learned anything in all my years in PR,” a consultant thinks, “it’s this: everyone has secrets...” (Taichert, 2004: 675). “We need somebody discreet,” a bank’s chief counsel says to a former PR employee (Womack, 1993: 41). “Perhaps it’s cynicism, or perhaps it’s a natural consequence of being in PR,” another PR character thinks, “but we’ve found that people seldom confide in you without actually expecting you to do something about the situation” (Babson, 1990: 140).

In the context of crime, “doing something about it” typically means *damage control*. First the characters have to decide if the crime publicity is harmful. Characters in several of the books explicitly discuss whether the publicity surrounding the crime can somehow be used to their benefit (Abbott, 2007; Bowers, 1997; Carlson, 2012; Morgan, 2008). “My partner often says there no such thing as good or bad publicity,” one character says, “only publicity or none” (Morgan, 2009: 151). When a different character runs it by Liz James, she reports that this theory makes “most public relations professionals – including me—cringe” (Stuyck, 1997: 228). Not surprisingly then, in most cases people decide that the company does not need crime-related publicity linked to its reputation (Strand, 2013). For example, the head of a garden club asks one PR sleuth to investigate because calling the police and would bring attention to a vandalism problem (Carlson, 2013). For this reason, often

PR characters are asked to or try to “put a lid on” negative news (Bretting, 2014: 47; see also Babson, 1971; Dickinson, 1937). In stories involving crime, though, the truth cannot usually be suppressed. This provides the PR character with an urge “to get at the facts in hope of being able to control the damage” (Nathan, 2000: 49). When a lab employee goes missing, Bert Swain knows the police have to be told, but tells a friend on the force, “we’d sure as hell like to avoid more bad press” (Nathan, 1994: 36). When clients cannot be kept out of the press, another tactic is “spin” or “whitewashing.” “Say a company’s got some problems that, if it gets out, would mean some real bad publicity,” freelancer Jack Lynch explains. “I help to put the best light on it possible. Spin control...” (Womack, 1993: 144).

Loyalty to the client explains some PR characters’ actions. “The customer is always right,” according to one (Babson, 1989: 57), and some PR practitioners find themselves therefore expected to “look the other way” or even cover up wrongdoing when they see questionable or criminal behavior. Sometimes they do (Bowers, 1997; Thomas, 2004); “my silence is certainly for sale,” one character says (Brennan, 1993: 89). In fact, only a few public relations characters in the sample fail to maintain confidentiality. Peter Sargeant II (sic) sells the inside scoop on the murder of his client to his former employer, the *New York Globe*, “for money, for publicity,” but no one seems to notice or care after he convinces a society woman to allow her dog to appear in a music recital, leaving all of the city agog (Box, 1953: 216). However, breeching client confidentiality was not usually inconsequential. The public relations officer at a British auto manufacturer is suspected of murder partly because of a sum of cash deposited into his bank account that he actually received for leaking photos of a new car (Jeffries, 1964), and a character who leaked information was also the murderer in an insider trading case (Strand, 2013).

In many instances, PR characters are “honest to a fault” (Wilde, 2004: 34), but loyalty to the client can also lead to *dishonesty*. “From what I understand, you PR people don’t know the truth from your butt,” one PR character is told (Taichert, 2004: 531). Recurring character Barbara Simons affirms that “the best way to tell a convincing lie is to yourself believe it to be the truth” (Epstein, 1996: 75). Sometimes this stereotype is played for humor, as when a police officer friend of Agatha Raisin says, “One would think all of your years in public relations would have taught you how to lie better” (Beaton, 1992: 106). But more often it involves not revealing all of what they know. Because of her job, “I was used to keeping confidences and doling out information for best effect,” one PR character thinks (Taichert, 2008: 55). The police are aware of this propensity. “I get the idea...that you’re concealing something again,” one officer says. “That’s part of a PR person’s job, too, isn’t it?” (Douglas, 1992: 13). Another character lies to the police and justifies it by saying, “Really, who *doesn’t* lie to cops?” (Abbott, 2007: 39, emphasis in original).

However, PR characters are not the only liars. “His honesty is going to be a liability,” an ethically-challenged employer says of a new publicist (Fowler, 1992: 7). Hence, there is one situation in which mystery novels deem it appropriate for PR characters to turn against the client: when the client is involved in the crime. PR characters are expected to *balance loyalty to the client with the public interest*. Lucy Preston was willing to defend her company “resolutely no matter what, willing to subordinate personal conviction to the profit motive, willing to accept that [the company’s] raison d’être is to make money for its stockholders, no matter what that involves, as long as it’s not illegal” (Thomas, 1996: 83).

In some mysteries, the client/employer finally goes a step too far and the PR character can no longer ignore the problem. Then PR characters not only tell the police what they know, but also work to help stop the criminal. Thomas Hollister is chief of staff, no longer the company’s head spokesperson, but when a fraud scheme is uncovered, he’s asked to handle the problem: “The public trusts you.” (Ryan, 2009: 25). Hollister decides to uphold the public trust, risking his reputation and even his life to uncover an insider trading scandal, eventually giving a criminal

deposition as the company collapses. Melissa O'Malley quits her job as a resort publicist to help an island reporter investigate a death involving her employers (Wilber, 2003); a hospital PR woman wears a police wire to obtain a confession (Bretting, 2014); and the public relations representative for a law firm helps to expose a child abduction ring (Larsen, 1997). Jack Lynch claims not to care about ethics – he's even been known to "grease some palms" (Womack, 1990: 125, 298) – and tells the district attorney that he investigated his employer only because he was trying to "put the world back in order"; still, his investigation prevails, and the criminal is sent to prison. When Jillian Hillcrest's friend is killed by a hit-and-run driver, she naturally cooperates with the police, and when people she works with are implicated, she continues to help while insisting the CFO and CEO could not possibly be killers. She is correct; although they were being blackmailed for having an affair, the murderer is an outsider (Strand, 2011). One mystery, *Balancing Act*, is specifically centered on the public relations practitioner's efforts to represent both the community and her employer. Elise Jeffries is hired to work for an international security company, and on her first day a massive warehouse fire results in injuries to two children. She begins to suspect there is a bigger problem, because people who live near a drainage ditch in her family's old neighborhood are getting sick and dying. "All of Tide County is counting on you to tell us the truth," her father says (Bunkley, 1997: 41, 297), while the company president warns that if she cannot balance her allegiance to the community with that of the company "you will never be of much value to this company, or any other, for that matter." She continues to bring problems to his attention, though, and after Jeffries and a reporter are almost killed by the head of the plant, the company agrees to clean up old waste pits and build a park instead. In these instances, the PR/sleuth uses access to information and people to right wrongs, not to promote the company.

In sum, it is their relationships with clients and employers that make public relations characters appropriate to the mystery genre. Their clients, more than the practitioners, operate in political, business, and entertainment circles where status, money, and power are at risk. When Julian Quist calls himself "Typhoid Julian" for seeming to attract violence, another character points out, "his work took him to where violence was inevitable – a world of glamorous personalities, big money, desperate competition" (Pentecost, 1976: 68). Because crime involving an employer has a PR component, and because they are often expected to do "damage control" regarding criminal behavior, public relations characters have access to information and people relevant to solving the crime. This makes them good witnesses, suspects, sidekicks, and especially sleuths. Yet, they owe confidentiality and loyalty to the client, and must balance that loyalty with the public interest.

5. Limitations and future research

In his discussion of "representational correctness," which focused on race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, Schiappa (2008: 7) argues that analyzing media content to show that representations are objectionable because they are stereotypical or prejudicial can be only a start to criticism. Representational correctness – the belief that "if art imitates life, it should do so correctly" – is impossible to achieve, he argues, and more importantly is only half the story; he calls for audience research that goes beyond professional decoding of media texts. This relates to a limitation of this study: having a single researcher. Schreier (2012) recommends including more than one in part because different people will read the data differently. Other scholars suggest that, recognizing that media texts always contain a multitude of potential meanings, the qualitative content analyst should not try to understand every possible meaning but only the "predictable patterns of interpretation" that are the most likely readings (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2017: 257–58). However, by Schiappa's (2012) reasoning, rather than including multiple scholars or most likely interpretations, the most productive next step would be audience analysis of media texts featuring public relations characters, integrating social scientific and humanistic

theories and methods. Other areas of future research could include qualitative content analysis of other genres and other sources, such as movies and television shows. Comparative approaches could be particularly informative, as illustrated by an analysis of journalist detectives in American, Russian, and Swedish crime fiction (Åker and Rogatchevski, 2020), which also identified the importance and uses of publicity in police procedurals. Regardless of the topic, however, future research should not expect representations of public relations to reflect the field "correctly."

6. Conclusion

Like the mystery genre itself, the practice of public relations is often seen as means of upholding the status quo (Ciszek, 2015). Writing of private investigators, Goldman (2011: 279) says that loyalty to client "seems often to trump other virtues or moral requirement, but this priority, while prevalent in professional ethics generally, should itself be a source of moral reflection and questioning." Although most of the novels in the sample examined here result in only the arrest of an individual, not the overthrow of a corrupt organization, in a handful of novels, PR practitioners do overcome criminal employers. This can, as Goldman suggests, create ethical engagement that allows readers to challenge the status quo. And yet loyalty lingers. One PR woman who solves a case asks the police to keep her name out of the story because the killer worked for her client, and she still needs their business (Kaye, 1972).

Taken together, mystery novels do not attempt to replicate reality. Detective fiction "is artificial and unrealistic" by its nature, for example by having so many cases solved by private individuals (Roth, 1995: 24). In their analysis of crime fiction and the legal profession, Friedman and Rosen-Zvi (2001: 1414) note that in stories, the boring, technical, and specialized parts of criminal law are ignored and, since their producers are interested in entertaining and making money rather than educating, even the parts that are included "are often wildly offkey." The same could be said of public relations.

Instead of searching for realism, looking at public relations characters in the entire context of the mystery genre demonstrates that public relations is a contested field. Debates swirl around honesty, confidentiality, and the relative value of negative publicity, all linked to the client relationship and the practitioner's proximity to power. Thus, as Gans (1999) indicated, analysis of these books offers insights beyond the mystery novel and about more than just popular perceptions of public relations. If popular culture really is, as Mukerji and Schudson (1991: 23) suggest, "a culture thinking out loud about itself," then the novels in this sample reveal both a deep mistrust of powerful institutions and people and a less prevalent but sincere hope that the people around them, including public relations practitioners, will act in the public interest.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Appendix A

Mystery Novels with Public Relations Characters.

- Abbott, M (2007) *The Song Is You*.
- Babson, M (1971) *Cover-Up Story*.
- Babson, M (1970) *In the Teeth of Adversity*.
- Babson, M (1972) *Murder at the Cat Show*.
- Babson, M (1989) *Tourists Are for Trapping*.
- Bastion, E (2009) *Marigold Mafia*.
- Bastion, E (2004) *No Just Desserts*.
- Beaton, MC (1992) *Agatha Raisin and the Quiche of Death*.
- Beaton, MC (1998) *Agatha Raisin and the Wellspring of Death*.
- Beaton, MC (1995) *Agatha's First Case*.

- Bowers, A (1997) *Naked in a Pinstripe Suit*.
- Box, E (1953) *Death Before Bedtime*.
- Box, E (1952) *Death in the Fifth Position*.
- Box, E (1954) *Death Likes It Hot*.
- Brennan, C (1993) *Full Commission*.
- Brennan, C (1991) *Headhunt*.
- Brett, S (2017) *Mrs. Pargeter's Public Relations*.
- Bretting, S (2014) *Bless the Dying*.
- Bunkley, Anita Richmond. (1997). *Balancing Act*.
- Carlson, A (2012) *Azalea Assault*.
- Carlson, A (2013) *Begonia Bribe*.
- Carlson, A (2014) *Keeping Mum*.
- Chapman, S (1997) *Hard Wired*.
- Childs, L (2015) *Ming Tea Murder*.
- de Beauvoir, J (2015) *Asylum*.
- Dickinson, W (1937) *Dead Man Talks Too Much*.
- Dickson, C (1934) *White Priory Murders*.
- Douglas, CN (2006) *Cat in a Quicksilver Caper*.
- Douglas, CN (1994) *Cat on a Blue Monday*.
- Douglas, CN (1992) *Catnap: A Midnight Louie Mystery*.
- Douglas, CN (1993) *Pussyfoot*.
- Epstein, C (1996) *Perilous Friends*.
- Epstein, C (1997) *Perilous Relations*.
- Fowler, C (1992) *Red Bride*.
- Grant, R (2013) *Unlock the Truth*.
- Green, BB (2004) *Foul Play*.
- Jeffries, R (1964) *Embarrassing Death*.
- Kaye, M (1972) *Lively Game of Death*.
- Larsen, J (1997) *Deadly Silence*.
- Lessner, JS (2013) *Bad Publicity*.
- Luomo, M (2005) *Vatican Assassin*.
- Mann, C (1991) *Capitol Hill*.
- McNamara, M (2008) *Oscar Season*.
- Morgan, K (2009) *Killer Sudoku*.
- Morgan, K (2008) *Murder by Numbers*.
- Morgan, K (2008) *Sinister Sudoku*.
- Nathan, P (2000) *Count Your Enemies*.
- Nathan, P (1995) *No Good Deed*.
- Nathan, P (1994) *Protocol for Murder*.
- Pentecost, H (1972) *Champagne Killer*.
- Pentecost, H (1976) *Die After Dark*.
- Pentecost, H (1971) *Don't Drop Dead Tomorrow*.
- Pentecost, H (1987) *Kill and Kill Again*.
- Pentecost, H (1983) *Murder Out of Wedlock*.
- Pentecost, H (1984) *Substitute Victim*.
- Reichardt, D and Oscar, J (2013) *Justice on Hold*.
- Ryan, A (2009) *Shakedown*.
- Strand, JT (2013). *Fair Disclosure*.
- Strand, JT (2011) *On Message*.
- Strand, JT (2012) *Open Meetings*.
- Stuyck, KH (1995) *Cry for Help*.
- Stuyck, KH (1996) *Held Accountable*.
- Stuyck, KH (1997) *Lethal Lessons*.
- Taichert, PN (2005) *Belen Hitch*.
- Taichert, PN (2004) *Clovis Incident*.
- Taichert, PN (2008) *Socorro Blast*.
- Thomas, B (2004) *Fourplay...the Dance of Sensuality*.
- Thomas, M (1996) *Baker's Dozen*.
- Wilber, R (2003) *Cold Road*.
- Wilde, L (2004) *Charmed and Dangerous*.
- Womack, S (1990) *Murphy's Fault*.
- Womack, S (1993) *Software Bomb*.

- Zellerbach, M (2011) *Love to Die For*.
- Zellerbach, M (2010) *Missing Mother*.
- Zellerbach, M (2009) *Mystery of the Mermaid*.

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