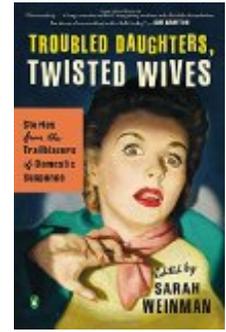


## Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives: Domestic Suspense Redux

Sarah Weinman, crime fiction connoisseur and editor of the essential new anthology *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives: Stories from the Trailblazers of Domestic Suspense*, is admirably doing her utmost to revive, restore, and reinvent the once highly-popular thriller subgenre of Domestic Suspense. Primarily written by women, this fiction penetrates the veneer of familial serenity to the dark side of homelife, exposing the creepy conundrums inherent in what are perceived as “women’s issues” and the female domain. During the genre’s heyday, from the post-war years until the early seventies, the concept of the nuclear family and the idea that “a woman’s place is in the home” had a stranglehold on the American psyche. The doyennes of Domestic Suspense strove to subvert the idealized family in their fiction and disturb their readers out of complacency.



Ironically, these widely-read authors began to disappear with the rise of second-wave feminism when women, ostensibly gaining entry into male bastions and professions, came to reject the domestic sphere. Ultimately, Domestic Suspense writers fell into oblivion mostly because, as Weinman notes in her excellent introduction, there was no institutional backing for them as there was for their male counterparts. Women writers were practically excluded from renowned reprint lines such as Black Lizard and Library of America that kept the work of male crime writers alive.

Weinman, who writes about contemporary crime fiction, became increasingly drawn to women writers in the field. She searched for the antecedents of authors such as Gillian Flynn, Megan Abbott, Laura Lippman, Attica Locke, and just before them, Liza Cody, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky, and Joyce Carol Oates. The early 20th-century “Queens of Crime” -- Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh -- were women who managed to break into and flourish within the more “male” crime genre in which good inevitably triumphs over evil, but Weinman’s research led her to other women writers whose fiction featured “ordinary people, particularly women, trying to make sense of a disordered world with small stakes, where the most important worry is whether a person takes good care of her children, stands up to a recalcitrant spouse or contends with how best to fit -- or subvert -- social mores.”

Weinman’s eclectic sampling pulls together unknown, better known, and well-known writers of the genre. Distinct stylistically, they all delight in unsettling the settled. Patricia Highsmith has pride of place with “The Heroine,” a deeply disconcerting story -- especially for parents -- about

a nanny who so severely loves her job she'll do anything to keep it. In Highsmith's novels the protagonists are mostly male but Weinman mentions two exceptions: *Edith's Diary*, widely considered to be her masterpiece, about a woman who invents a happy family as she descends into madness; and *The Price of Salt*, a two-woman road trip novel that Terry Castle claims inspired Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Another author here of similarly enduring fame is Shirley Jackson, best known for her much anthologized short story "The Lottery," though a number of her superb novels, such as *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) about a greedy relative who dares to disturb the macabre ménage of two weird sisters and their uncle, are exemplars of Domestic Suspense. Her story "Louisa, Please Come Home" reveals how our fantasy of home and family can be dangerously more compelling than the reality.

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, whom Raymond Chandler called "the top suspense writer of them all," is represented by the story "The Stranger in the Car" reminiscent of her most famous novel *The Blank Wall* (1947) in that it sharply contrasts the perceived weakness and passivity of women with their fierce determination to protect their family and sphere. Charlotte Armstrong was a prominent suspense writer in the 1950s and 1960s, her work often used by Claude Chabrol for his films -- *La Rupture* (1970); *Merci pour le chocolat* (2000) -- and her novel *Mischief* was the basis for the Marilyn Monroe film *Don't Bother to Knock* (1952). Her classic novel *Lemon in the Basket* (1967) slowly and relentlessly disassembles all appearances of a normal, talented, wealthy family. Armstrong's story here, "The Splintered Monday," revolves around an elderly aunt who refuses to be cowed by the condescension and invisibility society affords people of her age and gender. Margaret Millar, one of crime fictions very best practitioners, never received the recognition granted her husband Ross MacDonald. *Beast in View*, *Stranger in My Grave*, *The Fiend*, *Banshee*, *Fire Will Freeze*, *Rose's Last Summer* -- so many of her twenty-five novels are simply great. Two of her finest, *The Listening Walls*, about a brother obsessed with his sister, and *Beyond This Point Are Monsters*, a tantalizing depiction of a clashing mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, explore family dynamics gone terribly awry. Her story "The People Across the Canyon" is about a girl who expresses her disappointment in her parents by inventing another set.

The remainder (half) of the writers included in *Troubled Daughters* were new discoveries for me -- with the exception of the great noir novelist and screenwriter Vera Caspary and the visionary Dorothy Hughes about whom I've written in previous columns. Nedra Tyre, a social worker, librarian, and teacher from Georgia, wrote mostly about the American South. Barbara Callahan, exclusively a short-story writer, explores the relationship between creativity and repressed childhood memories in her cogent story "Lavender Lady." Helen Nielsen, author of over a dozen novels, also wrote for Alfred Hitchcock Presents and Perry Mason. Her story "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," explores the perils of marrying the boss. Joyce Harrington worked as an actress and in advertising, her short stories written for extra income; "The Purple Shroud" is a discerning, powerful portrait of the long-suffering wife of an artist who decides she will suffer no more. Sara Paretsky has written of Dorothy Salisbury Davis that "there's a richness to her understanding of the human condition that is missing from most contemporary

crime fiction.” Davis’s story “Lost Generation” has a plausible, other-worldly horror feel. Miriam Allen Deford, a feminist campaigner and civil rights activist, wrote in “Mortmain” about a geriatric nurse who rebels against the frustrations and indignities of her job only to find her patient is ahead of her. Celia Fremlin’s first novel, *The Hours Before Dawn* (1958), began while she was taking care of her three small children, centers around the loneliness, isolation, and descent into madness of a young mother suffering from post-partum depression. Her story “A Case of Maximum Need” is narrated by an 87-year-old resident of the Sheltered House of the Elderly who appreciates the staff’s efforts to protect her when really it is they who need protecting.

As Weinman remarks, the recent successes of books such as Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* and Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* prove that anxiety about the expectations versus the realities of women’s roles is alive and well today. Ours, perhaps, is an era in which disdain for the feminine is being reassessed, a new appreciation for the value and validity of traditionally female concerns growing. By compiling and finding a publisher for this powerful and gripping anthology, Sarah Weinman has done for Domestic Suspense writers what scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Sheila Rowbotham have done for women writers in general—recognizing and defining a tradition that future readers and writers can easily access, build upon, and, above all, revel in.

NB: The majority of the books mentioned in this column are either out of print or published by obscure presses.

NBB: An excellent new novel squarely in the Domestic Suspense genre is Lisa Gornick’s *Tinderbox*, due out from FSG in September. My blurb for it: “I was gripped from the first line of Lisa Gornick’s ingenious novel to the last. Using a polished prose to scratch hard and deep through the surface of a pristine upper-middle-class Upper West Side family’s life, Gornick’s incisive narrative explores the creepy underbelly of privilege and self-satisfaction.”

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