

Sisters and sluts



How did a feminist political scientist come to be a "mystery slut"? Read on.

By Sally Kenney.

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Watch for future articles from Sally Kenney on mysteries and the intrigues of the genre.

Political science is a male-dominated profession, as is university teaching. Like most serious graduate students and assistant professors, I told myself that reading for pleasure was a luxury I could ill afford on my drive toward tenure. When I mentioned novels to colleagues, they would lament, "I wish I had time to read," implying such extravagant indulgence marked me as lacking commitment.

But sometime in my third year of full-time teaching at the University of Iowa in Iowa City I experienced again the euphoric escape that had been so much a part of my childhood when I read everything in the house from Nancy Drew to Readers Digest Condensed Books to trashy paperbacks.

I decided if tenure meant giving up the pleasure in reading, it was too high a price to pay. Still, I kept my consumption of largely woman-authored novels to myself.

Deciding early on to eschew the two languages of male bonding—sports and computers—I searched for common experience to share with my male colleagues over Friday-afternoon beers. Although I was far more athletic than most of these men, I thought it unlikely that my feigned interest in competitive sports would convince them I was one of the guys. Nor, as a qualitative social scientist, could I convincingly swagger through the lingo of hard data manipulation.

But the chair of my department read mysteries and, although I had never understood the addiction, I decided to give Le Carré a try.

Diligently proceeding from the beginning of the author's oeuvre (showing a penchant for reading series fiction in order that renders me the butt of jokes in my reading circle today), I began with his mysteries that preceded the spy

novels.

Le Carré's male characters were flawed, but they were complex moral beings reacting to outside forces. The plot, however, hinged on the reader's being taken in by a woman, seemingly embracing her feminine role, who was inexplicably evil. What I hoped would be a shared pleasure was quickly marred by feminist critique, precisely what separated me from my male colleagues in the first place. This would not do.

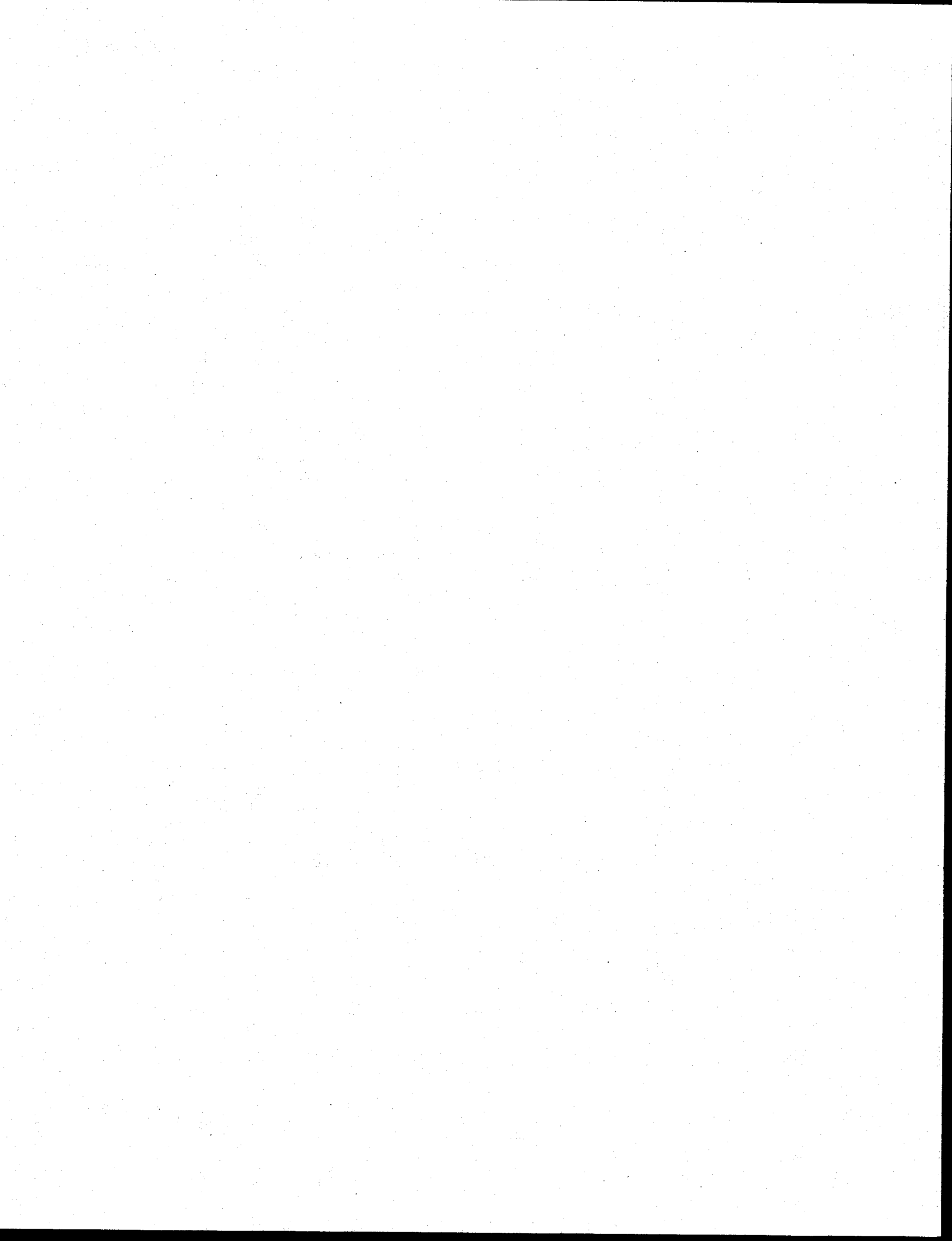
Nevertheless, Le Carré had reactivated in me the pleasures of the genre. First was the pleasure of serial fiction, returning to characters known and loved and watching their stories unfold. Second was the puzzle that is solved, the chaos ordered, the darkness pushed back until the next time by the light of the hero or (as I preferred) heroine.

Ironically, the experience of reading Le Carré recreated the world from which I sought escape—instead of trying to fit into a male world, I was trying to identify with a male hero. In my search for alternatives, I clumsily stumbled upon Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton.

I did not immediately take to the first Paretskys, although I adore them now and admire her as a person as well as an author. It was something about the sparseness and the talk of linen trousers and meal menus that put me off.

I read through Naiad Press' list of mysteries, although how I zeroed in on that press, I have no idea. (I do really like both Claire McNabb and Katherine Forrest.) I had no guide, no sorting principles or markers. But I did start to reveal my newfound leisure activity to a few friends.

We would find a writer we liked and read her entire works. Early favorites were Linda Barnes, Liza Cody, Susan Conant, Patricia Cornwell,



Amanda Cross (I devoured every single one of these with the academic heroine), Joan Hess, Lia Matera, Mary Kitteredge, Meg O'Brien, B. J. Oliphant, Barbara Paul, Kerry Tucker.

I was not picky; I took them all—the quirkiest the main character, the better.

When a feminist law professor moved to Iowa City, we decided to have a potluck and invite everyone in town whom we knew and who liked to read mysteries with female protagonists. That first dinner at my house was electric. Although I was the host, I remember barely being able to force myself to the kitchen to fetch silverware or glasses, fearful I would miss something.

We brought our favorites, exclaiming, "You've never heard of so-and-so?" and shrieking with excitement. We called ourselves Sisters in Crime (highly illegal, since the real Sisters in Crime carefully guards the use of its name) and met monthly for a potluck, rotating hosts.

At one of our more memorable evenings, at the home of a new member, we started hearing voices. We first assumed a child was watching TV. Listening more carefully, we began to fear our host had an autistic or severely disturbed child locked away. Then, after hearing our distinctive, and in my case quite loud, laughter mimicked perfectly, we finally realized she had a macaw. Each time the group would laugh and there was a pause, the bird would emulate our voices, making all laugh again.

We kept index cards of borrowed books and I acted as librarian. This eventually became comical as I quizzed each member, who would sigh as the pile at home grew larger and larger. In my prime, I could identify the color of covers and remember who had read which mystery, even when they themselves could not.

I did get tenure, but not without a fight. While I was in limbo, the group suggested it would be too risky for me to borrow the "how-to" books for authors, such as "how to use poisons."

I love those women and was delighted that my solitary, undirected passion became shared through our friendship. Although I was a founder, and considered myself indispensable, I am proud to report the group is still thriving, nearly five years after I moved.

When I moved to Minneapolis, it felt slightly less foreign because I had read Ellen Hart and M.D. Lake, as well as Nevada Barr's **Superior Death**.

At a reception where I was supposed to be schmoozing with prospective donors and pontificating on my new vision, I overheard a woman talking about mysteries. I pounced desperately on the kindred spirit and a wonderful friendship ensued. She had friends, I had the idea, and a new mystery group was launched.

Since the two of us read everything, we called ourselves the "Mystery Sluts." The librarians in the group particularly relish the title, as sluttishness is not a trait generally associated with their profession. As I have become less promiscuous, so to speak, and downright selective in my reading, my co-founder, who reads more than anyone I know, keeps me busy with all her new finds.

Now that I am out of the closet and am proud of my consumption of what I facetiously call trash, my love of feminist detective novels connects me to women in the most surprising places. Not only has it been my entrée for new friends in the Twin Cities, it also has been a bridge in conversations with women from Molly Ivins to members of the California judiciary.

I identify with the struggles of the sleuths I read about, be they amateurs or professionals—their physical risk taking, their passion for justice, their skillful use of sarcasm, their defiance of conventional gender scripts, their challenges to male authority and their wit and intelligence.

I like the fact that they do not have tidy, successful lives, but exist at the margins of society. More and more I find myself drawn to writers of mysteries who do what other successful novelists do—bring a place and time to life (whether it is Donna Leon's Venice or Sara Paretsky's Chicago); explore the complexities of relationships over time, untangling their origins and dysfunctions; and confront the darkness of the world and often the difficulty, if not futility, of making it a better place.

◆◆ Sisters in crime: Are you part of the family? Tell us about your favorite mystery writers and the pleasures of the genre.



Linda Barnes



Ellen Hart



Sara Paretsky



Donna Leon

