

DEGREES CONFERRED BY THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
BEAUTY, BRAINS, AND BYLINES: COMPARING THE FEMALE JOURNALIST IN  
THE FICTION OF SHERRYL WOODS AND SARAH SHANKMAN

by

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“Women journalists present a paradox. Their presence as professional writers and presenters of news is now commonplace, yet they continue to be marked as ‘other,’ as ‘different’ from their male colleagues. In print news, official rhetoric proclaims that a journalist’s gender is irrelevant. However, while maleness is rendered neutral and male journalists are treated largely as professionals, women journalists are signified as gendered: their work is routinely defined and judged by their femininity.”

—Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming, *Women and Journalism*

## **Dedication**

For the One who lead me here.

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## **Abstract**

This work examines the image of the female journalist in two series of novels by authors Sherryl Woods and Sarah Shankman. Tracing the image of the female journalist from its historical roots to its appearance in late twentieth-century fiction, this study uses the two main protagonists as a guide. Focusing on major stereotypes like the sob sister, stunt reporter, victim, and “one of the boys,” this work contextualizes her image alongside her real-life popular culture counterparts. Close examinations of the characters’ relationships with men, newsgathering ethics, and publicity they experience as successful female reporters working in a predominately male profession are crucial to the larger picture to which these images contribute. The authors’ attempts at reproducing accurate representations of females within the newsroom and portraying progressive, liberated representations of womanhood are also considered. The final chapter analyzes the series’ raceless Southern settings as both a historical impossibility and the creation of a utopian society that propagates racism without “racists.”

## **Introduction: Fiction, Feminism, and the Media: Why They Matter**

*Women's history is a complicated business, hardly a story to be told in terms of winners and losers, great men, or progress forward, as in a women's context all the usual benchmarks may have differing and contested definitions. This is certainly true in telling the story of women in the profession of journalism.*

-Patricia Bradley and Gail Collins, *Women and the Press: The Struggle for Equality*

The profession of journalism has not always held open its doors, ready and willing to accept reporters committed to revealing the full story. In journalism's early years, female reporters were not given admission to journalism schools and were only allowed inside newsrooms to write about unimportant "soft" news that would never find its way to the front pages. The image of the female reporter in popular culture, however, has not followed suit and has opened the doors to fictional women who yearn to report the news. Deemed "reporter-fiction," this literature abounds with images of women participating in the field of journalism as copy editors, print reporters, and broadcasters. Yet, these images, which are often unrealistic, stereotypic, and detrimental to readers' expectations are often misconstrued as "progress."

When readers turn toward these myriad fictional accounts, they often see reified age-old stereotypes and misnomers. They read about female news anchors who are portrayed as attractive blondes with busty silhouettes and dim wits; they see female reporters who want to cover fashion and lifestyle, not politics or business; they see female journalists who nurture a passion for writing only to give it up for marriage soon after. Moreover, all of these female journalists are placed against a backdrop of male success and newsroom subordination. All of these mass media images have a massive

effect on the collective female consciousness and its function as a “daily reminder of the unstable ground on which notions of gender, sexuality, and even nationhood are built.”<sup>1</sup>

Like many other organizations, “the institution and profession of journalism has been structured by gender.”<sup>2</sup> As image makers and movers and shakers, the media have succeeded financially while making newsrooms “boys only” clubs. These gendered restrictions keep the glass ceiling intact, thereby preventing women (until recently) from receiving promotions, power, and a say in the news content. Indeed, the gendered systems of media power uphold a male-oriented news agenda that has and will continue to shape the way the public views the world and their place in it.

Women’s inability to define news and move issues of importance to women onto the front pages has been limited by women’s roles in society, but also, significantly, by their positions in the media industry. Men, primarily white men, have long dominated the newsroom editorial boards so not only have they shaped news from outside of the industry but defined it from within.<sup>3</sup>

Until women are able to permeate the highest echelons of power within the news industry as editors, publishers, and executives of media consolidation, old restrictions will remain in tact, both to the detriment of the news itself and to the communities seeking balanced, fair, and equal reporting.

Reporter-fiction tries—consciously or unconsciously—to challenge and transform this gendered, patriarchal media system for its female readers, providing more images of women in journalism who have it all—degrees from the best universities, successful careers, front-page stories, and a love life to boot. Nevertheless, as these novelists attempt to place the female reporter as a strong and viable force within the male-dominated journalistic world, the image of the female journalist in fiction becomes befuddled between the realities and the representations.

The ways in which women are represented in news media send important messages to the viewing, listening, and reading publics about women's place, women's role, and women's lives. The media...are arguably the primary definers and shapers of the news agenda and perform crucial cultural functions in their gendered framing of public issues and in the gendered discourses that they persistently promote.<sup>4</sup>

The same is true for novelists, who create fictional characters and scenarios that either seek to mimic or exaggerate the lives of real journalists. These images hold a meaning that cannot be overlooked. The undeniable paradox of these novels originates in their wide and varied distributions, in which these oft-unrealistic images reach many women but set them up for failure if they believe that real female reporters and these beloved characters have anything substantial in common.

The purpose of this text lies in the comparison of images of female reporters promoted by the media and those found in the series of novels by authors Sherryl Woods and Sarah Shankman. Incidentally, both authors have written a series of novels depicting not only a female journalist as the protagonist but also set their novels in the Deep South, which affects each woman in unique ways. Their characters, Amanda Roberts (Woods) and Samantha Adams (Shankman), bear the burden of reflecting the realities of the times in which they were created (1980-2000), while embodying actual change in hegemonic gender norms, expectations, and roles for women in the journalism.

While a good deal of research has been done examining the role of women in journalism, very little research has been completed in the area of the image of the female journalist in fiction, particularly works set in the South during the late twentieth century. This study attempts to fill that void by examining the changes that these novels have undergone since Donna Born's 1981 seminal essay "The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction 1890 to the Present," which examines the fictional images

of female reporters in five separate time periods: 1890-1920, 1920-1940, 1940-1945, and 1945-1980. In her analysis, Born documents how the fiction of this time period reflects historical events that changed women's role in society and the workplace. Take, for example, the female journalist portrayed in novels from 1890-1920. According to Born,

The image of the woman journalist that emerges in the fiction of this period is that of a strong and capable woman, and reflects the 'New Woman' of the early feminists' ideal. The woman journalist is single and young, attractive, independent, reliable, courageous, competent, curious, determined, economically self-supporting, professional, and compassionate.<sup>5</sup>

From here, Born notes the burst of women into the workplace during World War II,<sup>6</sup> the ways in which the women's romantic relationships with men change ("getting the scoop' is more important to her than a love affair"<sup>7</sup>), and the more recent fiction that "reflect[s] the professional woman's struggle to reconcile her identity and professional ambition with the cultural stereotype."<sup>8</sup>

Building upon Born's established theories and observations, this paper strives to forge a new perspective on the specific literature of Woods and Shankman during the 1980s and 1990s. By analyzing each series (see Appendix A for titles and summaries), this study analyzes: (1) how the two main characters navigate and defy stereotypes; (2) how they gather their news; (3) how they interact with others in the newsroom; (4) how they separate themselves and their bodies from their stories and their sources; (5) how they form relationships with men, romantic or otherwise; and (6) how the creation of a raceless South perpetuates a subtle racism that both characters embody despite their progressive upbringings. Moreover, the ways the characters are interrelated with each other and history to form a more complete and justified image of the female journalist in fiction conclude this analysis.

## Introduction Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Lumby, 1997. p. xxiv

<sup>2</sup> Chambers, Deborah, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming. *Women and Journalism*. London: Routledge, 2004. p. 231

<sup>3</sup> Harp, Dustin. *Desperately Seeking Women Readers: U.S. Newspapers and the Construction of a Female Readership*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. p. 13

<sup>4</sup> Byerly, Carolyn M., and Karen Ross. *Women & Media: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. p. 40

<sup>5</sup> Born, Donna. "The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction: 1890 to the Present." Department of Journalism, Central Michigan University, 1981. p. 7

<sup>6</sup> "[E]ight million women entered the work force during World War II, increasing the proportion of working women from 25 to 36 percent of all adult women." Ibid. p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 17

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 20

## Chapter One: Character Biographies

*It's astonishing what women will do when they take to newspaper work.*

—W.D. Howells

### **Samantha Adams: “Renowned Girl Reporter”**

It is clear to readers that Samantha (Sam) Adams is not the typical Southern belle upon her return to Atlanta from a stint working as an award-winning reporter for the San Francisco *Chronicle*.<sup>9</sup> Despite being born into Atlanta’s high society,<sup>10</sup> Sam trades in her social privileges—and her debutante ball—for a green sports car.<sup>11</sup> An only child orphaned after her parents were killed in a plane crash in Paris,<sup>12</sup> she is taken in by her Uncle George because they “always had a special bond.”<sup>13</sup> By the age of fifteen, she had been to Europe twice because George had “want[ed] her horizons to have no limits.”<sup>14</sup>

Tall, dark, intelligent, and in her late thirties,<sup>15</sup> Sam chalks up her short, dark curls,<sup>16</sup> big brown eyes,<sup>17</sup> and general physical preservation to “good genes, lots of sleep, eight glasses of water a day, and miles of fast walking.”<sup>18</sup> Aside from this short description of Adams’s appearance, readers must tune into the reactions of secondary characters to get a more well-rounded depiction. Indeed, some of the best physical descriptions of her physique come from the male gaze: “Trying not to be too obvious about it, [he] slid his eyes up Sam’s legs. Up to her great chest. Elegant nose...She had huge brown eyes, and a classically beautiful face that reminded him of some star he’d once seen in an old movie on TV.”<sup>19</sup>

Not only is Adams well-traveled and beautiful, she is also well-educated. She attended Emory University in Atlanta and was named to the dean’s list.<sup>20</sup> After her freshman year, she followed her boyfriend Beau Talbot to Stanford University<sup>21</sup> and

remained a student there, despite their hard breakup and his relocation to New York to be with his new love. Reacting poorly to the breakup, Adams went through a time in which, “she’d joined anything that would give her license to smoke dope and drink Southern Comfort, yell at the police and throw smoke bombs.”<sup>22</sup> While on the rebound at Stanford, Adams married a “bearded draft resister”<sup>23</sup> whom she later divorced.

Adams’s return to her home in the South forces her to answer questions she had been denying during her stint in California. “During the years away when people asked her... ‘Why did you leave the South?’ she’d answer flippantly... ‘Because of a summer romance. Because of a broken heart.’ She’d said that for years and years and years, long past the time, perhaps, when she should have forgotten.”<sup>24</sup> To forget about her broken heart, Adams partakes in a downward spiral of drinking and partying. When her drinking borders on alcoholism, she enlists in an Alcoholics Anonymous program that leads her to her love of Perrier.<sup>25</sup>

After many promiscuous one-night encounters with men, she meets San Francisco’s chief of detectives, Sean O’Reilly, and falls in love. But when he is killed by a drunken driver, Sam cannot help but see the irony “that she, who had almost killed herself with booze during her twenties but had been sober for almost ten years, should lose the man she loved to a drunk driver.”<sup>26</sup> Still reeling from O’Reilly’s death, Adams takes a prestigious job with Atlanta’s major newspaper, the *Constitution*. “Sam’s series on a serial killer in San Francisco had won her journalistic prizes, had earned her the reputation that had gotten her this cushy job with the *Constitution*, naming her own stories, answering only to the managing editor.”<sup>27</sup>

With a Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism under her belt, Adams makes her own rules, picks her own stories, and spends as much time away from the newsroom as possible. Notorious for her directness,<sup>28</sup> insubordination, independence, wit, charm, and ability to write front-page stories about murder, crime, and scandal, Adams is not your typical girl reporter—she’s better.

**Amanda Roberts: “I don’t make the news. I just report it.”**

While very few details are offered up about 28-year-old<sup>29</sup> Amanda Roberts’s physical appearance other than a quick mention of her gray eyes<sup>30</sup> and “delicate blonde eyebrows,”<sup>31</sup> author Sherryl Woods spares no details about this female reporter’s personal and professional background: “Amanda Roberts had grown up in Manhattan, she’d gotten her journalism degree from Columbia and her law degree from Harvard, and she’d had every intention of building a career as one of the best investigative reporters in the country.”<sup>32</sup> To say she is qualified is an understatement.

But when her husband, Mack Roberts, is offered a professorship at the University of Georgia, Roberts relocates her life and journalism career to the rural South, where her prize-winning<sup>33</sup> work on the police beat in New York<sup>34</sup> is of seemingly little use. In fact, “She was a type A personality living in a type B environment.”<sup>35</sup> Despite this drastic change in scenery, Roberts takes a job reporting for the *Gazette*, a small weekly Georgia newspaper where she finds herself writing about bake sales and quilting parties instead of robberies and murders. In New York, she “had worked for tough editors, obnoxious editors, alcoholic editors, and brilliant editors who could fine-tune a story, snipping out the excess with the precision of a skilled surgeon.”<sup>36</sup> But at the *Gazette*, Roberts is the

only full-time female reporter working for editor Oscar Cates, a small-town, Southern boy who becomes more like her father than her editor.

Bad news befalls Roberts when she discovers that her husband is having an affair with one of his students. She asks for a divorce,<sup>37</sup> opening the door for former New York detective (and her love interest) Joe Donelli in the process. She tells Donelli,

I've always known what I wanted out of life. I worked damn hard to get where I was as a reporter. I was respected. I was in control. I always felt secure about my personal life, too, until Mack walked out. It was really the first thing to ever really go wrong for me. It shook me to see how easily that control could slip away.<sup>38</sup>

Regaining control of her career and her love life, Roberts is hired by Atlanta's newest magazine, *Inside Atlanta*,<sup>39</sup> where she is able to cover crime in the South's big city and earn the magazine a good reputation in journalistic circles. She marries Donelli, and the two adopt Pete, a homeless teenager whom Roberts met during one of her investigations. In the final novel, Roberts discovers that she is pregnant and though first taken by surprise at the thought of her new role as a biological mother, she becomes accustomed to the idea by the end of the series.

Suddenly, the female reporter who wanted nothing else but to move northward begins to love the South; the woman who "prided herself on needing no one,"<sup>40</sup> finds her match in another, and the journalist who thought nothing big or bad ever happens in the small-town South earns accolades with her features about deceit, betrayal, crime, and, most of all, murder.

## Chapter One Endnotes

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- <sup>9</sup> Shankman, Sarah. *First Kill All the Lawyers*. New York, New York: Pocket Books, 1988. p. 13
- <sup>10</sup> Sam is a member of DAR and the Daughters of the Confederacy, elite Southern social groups. Ibid. p. 22
- <sup>11</sup> “‘She finagled me out of a little green sports car in lieu of a debut,’ said her uncle. ‘It hasn’t gotten any better since.’” Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 20
- <sup>12</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 20-21
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 20-21
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 22
- <sup>15</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 33
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 26
- <sup>17</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 79
- <sup>18</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 26
- <sup>19</sup> Shankman, *Now Let’s Talk of Graves* 1990. p. 2
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 23
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 23
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 45
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 31
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 31
- <sup>25</sup> “Nothing had grabbed her attention before. Shattered glass, lost shoes, rolled cars, broken friendships and promises, hangovers, dry heaves, hallucinations, blackouts—none of it had jerked her up and made her face that she was an alcoholic. She couldn’t handle the booze, it was running her life, and *that* was a problem...That had been her first step on the long road back.” Ibid. p. 50-51
- <sup>26</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p.28
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 32
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 57
- <sup>29</sup> Woods, Sherryl. *Reckless*. New York, New York: Warner Books, 1989. p. 86
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 47
- <sup>31</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments* 1990. p. 223
- <sup>32</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 5
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 40

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 5

<sup>35</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments* 1990. p. 12

<sup>36</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 2

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 6

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 198

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 224-225

<sup>40</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments* 1990. p. 184

## Chapter Two

### Stereotypes: Victims and Victors

*Images don't stand alone—they constantly quote from other images, lending them a layered, half-seen dimension. For another, images don't stop at their own visual borders—they're affected by what frames them. How we read an image, in other words, depends largely on where we see it, when we see it, what preconceptions we bring to it and what we know about it in advance.*

—Catharine Lumby, *Bad Girls: The media, sex & feminism in the 90s*

Journalism and stereotypes are more closely linked than one might assume.

According to *Gender Communication* author Laurie P. Arliss, the term *stereotype* was coined by a journalist in the 1920s who was

attempting to describe how members of a given society create shared 'mental pictures.' These pictures were believed to serve those who shared them in two ways: (1) by providing a shortcut for dissecting the continuous world into identifiable categories and (2) by providing a comfortable sense that the status quo was intact.<sup>41</sup>

Although the feminist movement introduced new meanings of womanhood into public discourse, the status quo continues to define femininity as thin, white, passive, soft-spoken, aspiring to marriage and motherhood, physically weak, uncompetitive, irrational, and emotional. And while the modern woman might brush aside these expected behaviors, the stereotypes remain just that—*expected* of her. Without a performance of stereotypes of femininity, she is seen as lacking, as unnatural, as anti-woman. These stereotypes serve the dominant ideology and produce unreasonable expectations for feminine behavior.

Indeed, "stereotypes may be more influential than we would like to imagine...[I]t is tentatively proposed that sex stereotypes provide a template against which all male and female behavior is initially judged."<sup>42</sup> These stereotypes, which form distinctive social

categories, play an important role in guiding what is considered right and wrong behavior for men and women, group formation, and even self-confidence. Sex-based dualisms uphold a power structure that makes male-associated characteristics superior: “[T]he stereotype of femininity is considerably less desirable than the stereotypic image of masculinity, particularly in a capitalistic society that covets strength, rationality, and competitiveness—and distributes power accordingly.”<sup>43</sup>

Sociologists believe that gender roles carry “a set of expectations about appropriate behavior in a social situation,”<sup>44</sup> and the mass media play a crucial role in reinstating and reinforcing these expectations to the public. Popular media, including the fiction presented here, “continue[s] to frame (in every sense of the word) women within a narrow repertoire of types that bear little or no relation to how real women live their real lives.”<sup>45</sup> Typecast as mothers or whores, butch or femme, girls-next-door, overemotional, tomboys, and bitches, women are placed within narrowly defined categories that prevent them from being whole.

Authors Carolyn M. Byerly and Karen Ross explore the idea of media representation and stereotyping in their book *Women & Media: A Critical Introduction*. They write: “The ways in which women are represented in news media send important messages to the viewing, listening, and reading publics about women’s place, women’s role, and women’s lives.”<sup>46</sup> Women’s representation in fiction is also important to examine because in novels, women can be all of the stereotypes or none at all at the whim of the author. Female reporters can achieve Pulitzer Prizes, answer to no one, and see their byline on the front page at least once a week; *or* they can be hyper-sexualized, passive, incompetent journalists who stick to what they know—fashion, lifestyle, and

romance. It is this counter-culture womanhood set against a backdrop of traditional feminine stereotypes in the works of Woods and Shankman that makes the image of the female journalist in fiction compelling and challenging.

Authors Woods and Shankman place their characters in a position to navigate through and around dominant stereotypes of femininity personally and professionally. As journalists who wield power and a public voice, they are instantly victorious over many of the limiting stereotypes of femininity, which expect women to be soft-spoken, docile, and limited to the domestic sphere. However, the conservative and history-riddled Southern setting of the novels keeps old stereotypes alive within the texts and jeopardizes the novels' modernized images.

This chapter explores the major stereotypes the fictional Roberts and Adams encounter throughout the course of their journalistic careers. The two women are judged against four major stereotypes of the female reporter from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—the sob sister, the stunt reporter, “one of the boys,” and the victim. The function of these stereotypes will be placed into historical context, thereby clarifying the ways in which Adams and Roberts are both victims and victors of stereotypes.

### ***The Sob Sister***

*By bringing a blush of authorship into the courtroom, the sob sisters inevitably engaged fundamental questions about how the public sphere was constituted and who should be allowed to operate within it.*

—Jean Marie Lutes, *Front-page Girls*

The term *sob sister* refers to a “female journalist who specialized in sentimental or human interest stories, or, more generally, a woman writer ‘who could wring tears.’”<sup>47</sup> Later, *sob sister*,<sup>48</sup> which was in common usage by 1910, became a derogatory term for

any female reporter<sup>49</sup> whose reports were “expected to express the conventionally emotional responses of women, documenting not just the news but the femininity of its teller.”<sup>50</sup> When publishers discovered that female readership was down, they hired more women in hopes of reaching out to a disengaged female audience, and, in turn, “Women readers and audiences were wooed by female journalists with a new kind of news that related to their lives.”<sup>51</sup> While the emotional, human-interest stories written by these women did eventually increase female readership, female journalists have taken great strides to shake this harmful stereotype that “recast[s] trailblazing professionals as gullible amateurs.”<sup>52</sup> While the term *sob sister* has continued to pigeonhole women reporters into covering “soft” news—“‘human interest’ stories, features and the delivery of a magazine-style of journalism<sup>53</sup>—real women reporters have blazed a trail so that fictional depictions of female reporters like Roberts and Adams can exist. Neither character refuses to be cornered by their respective editors into covering traditional “women’s news,” and the alternatives prove fruitful for their news careers.

When Roberts first arrives at the *Gazette*, her editor, Oscar Cates, “had her covering shopping mall dedications and ice cream socials over a three-county area, instead of corruption in government, corporate insider trading, or organized crime.”<sup>54</sup> But, when he sends her to a local department store to cover a cooking demonstration, the chef is murdered on stage and Roberts finds herself in a position to investigate the murder.<sup>55</sup> The irony of the situation is made apparent: “If Oscar had any notion that his crummy little feature assignment was going to turn into front page news, he’d have been [t]here himself, leaving Amanda in the office to write yet another breezy roundup of quilting circle activities.”<sup>56</sup> Later, when Cates sends her to cover a home preservation tea,

pulling her off a murder story she had been investigating for a center spread in *Inside Atlanta* magazine, Roberts takes matters into her own hands.<sup>57</sup> She defies Cates and writes the murder story anyway, earning her editor's praise for objectivity and accurately capturing the source's pain.<sup>58</sup> But even in the most sincere, vulnerable moments with sources, "Amanda consider[s] her work serious, well-researched investigative journalism. She despise[s] sensational pulp"<sup>59</sup> and goes to great lengths to keep her byline away from the over-sentimentality that historically plagued the women's pages.

Like Roberts, Adams rarely covers soft news and manages to circumvent leisure stories. Adams comes to Georgia's *Constitution* with a famed reputation for covering serial killers, murders, and city crime, and she stands up to her editor to secure her reputation as a hard news reporter:

I know you call the shots here, Hoke, but in case you've forgotten, life-style, entertainment, and froufrou aren't my regular beat. Remember me? The reporter who specializes in blood, gore, bad guys shooting up the little girl behind the counter in the fried chicken joint because she ran out of dark and crispy, didn't get their change back fast enough?<sup>60</sup>

While at the paper, Adams enters strip clubs, elite boys-only clubs, and the offices of high law enforcement officials to get her stories. Toliver never assigns her traditional feature stories (partly because he never assigns her stories at all), but he also does not encourage her hard-hitting story ideas. Adams also never receives support from her family, especially Peaches, her stand-in mother and her uncle's housekeeper:

PEACHES: I don't know what you want to be poking around in such troublesome things anyway... Why can't you write about nice things?

ADAMS: One doesn't *investigate* things that are nice... Next thing you know, Peaches, you're going to be telling me that my place is in the home.<sup>61</sup>

Throughout series, it becomes clear that Adams must deal with criticism, not only from her editor, but also from family members who want her to cover more conventionally feminine subjects and, thus, steer clear of the danger that comes along with covering scandals, murders, robberies, and kidnapping. Shankman's fiction reflects the current pressures that "still exist for women to write according to a perceived type, a logical demand from an industry that finds profit in dipping into the culture's easy stereotypes,"<sup>62</sup> while simultaneously providing readers with a character who sneakily circumvents the journalistic trap set out for women since their entry into the profession.

In *She Walks In Beauty*, the last novel of the series, Adams still refuses to be cast as a sob sister, proving to be a woman of integrity. When the *Constitution* begins to take a turn toward the sensational, Adams turns in her resignation right after filing her story from the Miss America pageant she is sent to cover in Atlantic City:

Despite a raft of good people still on staff, the *Constitution* wasn't what it was when they'd enticed her away from the *Chronicle*. Its slant had suddenly shifted away from a flirtation with serious journalism back to pop reporting with large pretty pictures done up in four color—rather like television. Sam was confused.<sup>63</sup>

Refusing to settle for sob sister journalism, Adams keeps her career as a serious journalist intact by resigning. Though it is not clear what Adams's next step will be, the reader must assume that her future in journalism involves a more serious news outlet.

### ***The Stunt Reporter***

*[N]o matter how 'straight' their news, how 'rigid and conservative' their style, and how much 'dignity and honor' they invested in their stories, they could not achieve the disembodied anonymity of the objective journalist.*

—Jean Marie Lutes, *Front-page Girls*

The female stunt reporter is perhaps one of the most dramatic, yet poignant portrayals of a female journalist. Historically, stunt reporters literally placed themselves

in the midst of the story, going to any lengths necessary to get the inside scoop. Their bodies became part of the news as they enrolled in mental hospitals (Nelly Bly, for example), invaded drug dens, became employees for corrupt corporations, sought out doctors who might perform an illegal abortion, and faked illnesses to gain entrance into hospitals.<sup>64</sup> “By adopting the hysteric’s hyper-female, hyper-excessive body, she created her own story and claimed the right to tell it in her own way.”<sup>65</sup> While the image of the stunt reporter has been condemned as exaggerative, dangerous, unprofessional, and unethical, both Adams and Roberts qualify as modernized versions of this historical stereotype. They “boldly challenged the value of experts’ neutrality, insisting instead on the significance of their own bodies as sources of knowledge.”<sup>66</sup> Undeniably, these women exude an expert stunt girl demeanor even though “stunt reporters have been viewed as an awkward, even embarrassing phase of sensation journalism, out of sync with the professionalization that was transforming news writing in the final decades of the twentieth century.”<sup>67</sup>

Both Adams and Roberts get to the heart of stories by inserting themselves directly into the action. Mimicking the real-life stunt reporters who came before them, these two women “[Act]...as the sensation heroines of their own stories, they [redefine] reporting and [use] their bodies not just as a means of acquiring the news but as the very source of it.”<sup>68</sup>

In Woods’s series, Roberts is constantly at the center of the unfolding action, even when she knows her actions are not appropriate journalism procedure. For example, she enrolls in a cooking class to scope out a suspect for a murder case she is writing a story about. Woods writes: “Journalistically speaking, Amanda supposed that wasn’t very

ethical, but it was practical. At the moment, she was able to live with the practical.”<sup>69</sup> Outdoing her competition, Roberts becomes creative rather than reactionary in order to get facts that no one else can get. Her presence is part of the development of the news, whether she intended it to be or not. Moreover, Roberts inadvertently becomes the object of anger for sources who do not want to be identified, criminals who want their illegal activity kept secret, and dangerous people who are the gateway to real informants. In the process of getting stories, she is threatened mortally or legally but always comes out at the right end of trouble. Roberts admits her tendency

to plunge into the middle of things regardless of the danger. It made for great copy, but it had also resulted in a few hair-raising incidents, not the least of which had been having her car bombed in New York and being shot at a few months earlier right there in Georgia.<sup>70</sup>

More stunt-ridden examples abound as she is framed for stealing a Civil War artifact and then imprisoned by the crooked sheriff who wants to throw her investigation off track.<sup>71</sup> And while Roberts does not always purposely insert herself into a situation to get a story like the stunt reporters of the past, she indirectly becomes part of the story, creating the very news she intends to report and putting herself in physical danger. Her editor Cates, assistant Jenny Lee, and boyfriend Donelli worry for her safety because of her reckless behavior. Lee admits that despite her admiration for her tenacious reporting, she is starting to agree with Cates and Donelli that “There are times when you are entirely too reckless for your own good.”<sup>72</sup> Roberts’s investigative style is always coupled with reminders from family, friends, and employers that she is, in fact, mortal.

Like her fictional counterpart, if Adams is not reporting the news, she is making it. Her knack for troublemaking (and news-making) is foreshadowed when she goes to a small Georgia town to complete interviews for an upcoming story. An intuitive waitress

at the local diner sums up Adams's presence, saying, "Looks to me like you're here to stir things up,"<sup>73</sup> and Adams does just that. Suspecting the town's sheriff to be dabbling in shady land deals and drug trafficking, she lies about her identity and goes straight to his office herself. She gets the story but is abducted, sexually harassed, and almost killed by Sheriff Dodd in the process. In another scene, Shankman describes Adams's first few weeks at the *Constitution* as a news-maker rather than reporter: "she'd cozied up to and disarmed a shooter in a shopping-center parking lot the second week after she'd moved back to Atlanta,"<sup>74</sup> saving a man's life. This is not the life of the average reporter but rather the semblance of a modern-day stunt reporter who places herself in the midst of news to get the news.

Adams and Roberts, like turn-of-the-century newspaperwomen, are "thoroughly entangled in conventional notions of womanhood" while "enacting a daily drama" where "they [appear] both defiantly public and defensively feminine."<sup>75</sup> Taking center stage in their own stories, Adams and Roberts "[renovate] the conventions of nineteenth-century sentimentality to suit the rapidly evolving mass media and [develop] controversial new models of self-reflexive authorship that [involve] not just reporting the news but *becoming* the news."<sup>76</sup>

### **One of the Boys**

*Some women try to 'beat the boys at their own game' by adopting assertive and macho styles...[W]omen have attempted to challenge masculine newsroom cultures that masquerade as neutral professionalism...*<sup>77</sup>

—Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming, *Women and Journalism*

The entrance of women into the newsroom disrupted and complicated what had formerly been an all-male bastion. "Women in the newsroom had to face the realities of a

profession that did not want them there in the first place, craft traditions that served to encourage stereotypes, and an acceptance of themselves as workers in a culture that said they should be at home.”<sup>78</sup> In order to make their professional transition smoother, female reporters often adopted the mentality of their male co-workers. In essence, they became “one of the boys.” To infiltrate into traditionally male beats such as business, politics, crime, and sports, female reporters have had to navigate gender role expectations in order to achieve male-proscribed success. Because “Journalists gain status in their work by acting ‘professionally’ and by exhibiting certain predefined traits of their ‘professional community,’”<sup>79</sup> female reporters have had to take on more “masculine” qualities in order to gain respect in the newsroom and acceptance by the majority.

As “gender is used to assign social status”<sup>80</sup> in the workplace, women who want to break out of the soft news “ghetto,” as it has been called, have had to grapple for respect:

Journalism’s ‘competitive culture’...draws attention to the fact that story assignment is not cooperatively worked out, but struggled over. In such a setting, females have difficulties not only getting their story ideas approved but also...in being assigned to high-profile beats and interview assignments.<sup>81</sup>

Even issues as minute as language and decorum were among male reporters’ initial concerns when women first entered the workplace because they believed “a feminine sensibility would require men to be careful about their personal habits and language.”<sup>82</sup> These gendered barriers, however, are not fully realized in the works of Woods and Shankman. For example, Adams’ editor soon discovers that her harsh language surpasses that of most of his male employees and even asks Adams to tone it down. He asks, “Is that how you earned your praises at the *Chronicle*? Saying things like ‘spill it’?”

That kind of talk may go over big in San Francisco, but you're going to have to develop a more ladylike style if you ever expect to make it in Atlanta."<sup>83</sup> Perhaps it is the novel's Southern setting that restricts Adams to a more genteel vocabulary, but Shankman makes it clear that Adams would fit in well in any other big city newsroom despite her gender. Also, Adams takes on a masculine form of her name, going from Samantha to a more gender-neutral Sam. Over the course of the series, she rejects her femininity in many small ways—like changing her name and talking tough—as a symbol of sacrifice for newsroom integrity. Adams uses newsroom lingo as competently as any man, and her gender-neutral byline does not allow readers to question her work on account of her gender.

In Woods's novels, Roberts is first separated from "the boys" through brief biographical descriptions that reinforce her femininity. Detaching her character from the stigma of alcohol abuse and chain smoking attached to male reporters, Woods creates a character whose only vice is sugar.<sup>84</sup> But, aside from that, Roberts quickly aligns herself with her male competition both on a newsroom and national level. She does not "indulge in feminine wiles"<sup>85</sup> and, instead, takes pride in her "instinctive reaction...to fight back. She hadn't gotten to where she was in life by being meek. She took chances. She accepted the consequences."<sup>86</sup> She exerts an autonomy and presence in newsroom interactions that mirror the privileges formerly only given to the best male journalists, and she chooses her own stories, which are far from "soft." In one scene, Roberts defends her story choices to a co-worker:

I do not indulge myself when I select my stories. I choose topics that I feel are important to this community. Admittedly, some of them are dark, but the world's not always made up of afternoon teas and coming out parties. I

occasionally tread on some very powerful toes, a practice that has made *Inside Atlanta* widely respected in journalistic circles.<sup>87</sup>

Roberts hereby denounces sob sisterdom and soft news for darker, harder stories, while claiming male beats for her own. Reminding her co-workers that she is “not some Southern flower who’s likely to wilt at the first sign of danger,”<sup>88</sup> Roberts transforms into “one of the boys” in order to gain credibility, access, and trust.

### ***The Victim***

*[T]here were always men who were willing to wreak havoc on the bodies and happiness of others, whether they were fighting for a cause or were only in it for themselves.*

—Sarah Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers*

The victim stereotype, above all others in these series, steals power away from the female reporters and places them at the whim of their male aggressors. While the sob sister, the stunt reporter, and “one of the boys” allow the fictional female journalist to write about what she wants, to insert herself into any situation she chooses, and to behave any way she desires, the victimized female journalist is robbed of choice. Images of women as victims are used frequently in Woods’s and Shankman’s portrayals of their characters, and as such, deserve “a little further scrutiny, since it says something very powerful about women’s agency and women’s role in society.”<sup>89</sup> Often, women are subjected to violence in their daily lives and are then re-victimized by the subsequent news coverage. Alternatively, the novels examined here portray female journalists who are victimized and are then subsequently forced to write the news and leave themselves out altogether.

One of Adams’s most intense run-ins with violence and victimization comes in the form of an ex-convict named Skeeter whom she helped put behind bars:

Skeeter was stark raving crazy. The rapist/murderer had killed three women in Atlanta before Sam's series on him in the paper pushed enough victims forward. Like most madmen, Skeeter needed someone to blame. He'd picked Sam. 'I'll get you, you bitch!' he'd screamed at her as they dragged him out of the courtroom after his sentencing. 'Melodramatic, don't you think?' Sam had flapped her lips...hoping her nonchalance would hide their trembling.<sup>90</sup>

On the lam from the law months later, Skeeter almost makes good on his promise of violence. Hiding in the backseat of Adams's car, he kidnaps her, ties her to a tree deep in the woods, and throws knives at her from a distance to enact his revenge. Saved at the last minute, Adams barely escapes Skeeter's plot to get even. Adams's near-death encounter with Skeeter is only one among many, including a run-in with a country sheriff. When she goes to Sheriff Dodd's office at the start of her investigation into his involvement with shady land deals, he asserts his physical dominance and tries to intimidate Adams through sexual assault: "He brushed his hand against hers as he gave her the cup and was in no hurry to remove it. She was suddenly aware of being alone in the room with this man. She wondered if he'd locked the door when he closed it."<sup>91</sup> Her intuition about Dodd proves true but unhelpful in a later situation, where she finds herself hostage in her own car with Dodd as the unruly and aggressive passenger. Pointing a gun to her head, Dodd demands that she drive far into the countryside, and, once incapacitated, he tries to enact his rape fantasy. "He lowered his face until it was almost touching hers. 'It makes me hot when you move like that.' He reached down and jerked up her skirt. 'Now, this part isn't going to hurt.'"<sup>92</sup> She is, once again, saved at the last minute with both her life and her integrity intact.

Victimization, nevertheless, is not limited to the novels' outlaws but also comes from the men the characters trust and respect. For instance, on her first day on the job,

Adams reports to her editor's office where he welcomes her, saying, "Dammit, there are so many frigging reasons I can't sleep with you."<sup>93</sup> Sam tolerates this sexual harassment, even though she finds the comment unacceptable:

She'd been called names by better men than Toliver, and she knew they were resorting to the tactic because she made them nervous. For just about the time their eyes fell to her breasts or her legs and their fantasies began...she'd start with her never-ending questions, which made some of them visibly twitch.<sup>94</sup>

While the reader can see how Adams tries to navigate around the sexual remark, she does so at the expense of her honor and dignity by trying to justify her editor's behavior at their very first meeting. By not speaking out against this inappropriate workplace interaction, Adams becomes disempowered and broken down to the sum of her parts. Depictions of Adams's sexual victimization immediately transform her from a self-assured reporter into a passive, sexualized body.

Roberts also becomes a victim throughout her series, and most of her encounters are perpetrated by anonymous male figures—masked men, men lurking in the dark, or men who try to commit violence from a distance using weapons or threatening letters. The first example occurs when Roberts is in the newsroom after hours looking at photographs related to a current story. Suddenly, she is hit over the head by a blunt object from behind and knocked unconscious.<sup>95</sup> Falling to the floor of the newsroom's photo lab, Roberts is made vulnerable in an alleged safe space. A newsroom attack like this one sends a frightening message that women can be violated at any time, anywhere.

Roberts also becomes a victim both during her investigations in the field and in her personal life. For example, after an intense workout, Roberts is almost smothered to

death in the steam room at her local gym, which was the site of a similar murder that Roberts witnessed and is in the process of investigating:

[T]he big, wraparound towel dropped over her head. Its thick, absorbent material shut out the light, and, worse, cut down her oxygen supply...She struggled, tearing at the towel, kicking out at the unseen attacker. Some blows actually hit their target, but the person was larger and stronger than she...She cursed her stupidity in letting down her guard for even a single minute...Finally, with a last ragged gasp, she fainted.<sup>96</sup>

Roberts's investigations, whether active or not, follow her into her personal life, and ironically, almost cost her her life.

In another novel, Roberts finds herself on the top of a former white supremacist-turned-politician, George Tolliver's hit list. When she discovers a clandestine meeting of the local neo-Nazis will be taking place, she positions herself underneath a window to listen. To her surprise, she finds herself and her current investigation into the local white supremacist community to be the topic of the angry meeting. Fearful that her investigative reporting might ruin Tolliver's chances of winning the political race, the supremacist group orders a few of the members to "Find the Roberts woman and take care of it."<sup>97</sup> Stunned, Roberts cannot believe that "She had just listened to a man, a prominent politician, order her execution."<sup>98</sup>

Finding herself in many near-death encounters makes Roberts nonchalant about death threats, menacing phone calls, stalkers, and attackers. In fact, these frightening situations affect those around her, particularly Donelli, more than they affect Roberts herself. The following passage, however, gives insight into the motives behind Roberts's negligent behavior—she is dedicated to journalism's noble cause no matter the risks:

DONELLI: Amanda Roberts, you are motivated by your obsession with investigative journalism. You like the chase, the hunt, the intrigue. You

can't stand dangling threads, any more than you can stand dangling participles...

ROBERTS: That is not true! I'm not some sort of danger junkie. I only put my neck on the line to get the facts, when I think it'll help to effect a change.<sup>99</sup>

Even though Roberts and Adams experience verbal, physical, and sexual violence throughout the course of their careers, they are reduced to an image of pain in the end. The words used to describe Adams's sexual encounter with Sheriff Dodd, along with the vivid account of Roberts's near-death encounter at the gym, point to a fascination with seeing women as victims. "Women thus appear to be at their most interesting when they are in most pain, when they experience most suffering."<sup>100</sup> Thus, the image of a strong woman made weak at the hands of men moves beyond fantasy to become an expectation for readers. Through a textual commodification of the characters' breasts, legs, face, and other body parts, these women "are actually being reduced to less than the sum of [their] body parts."<sup>101</sup> This reporter-fiction is not reinventing the image of the female reporter or providing readers with a new perspective on non-violent male/female relationships. Instead, Woods and Shankman "[perform] an affirmatory and confirmatory function in (re)articulating the rules of the game to which we are all supposed to subscribe"<sup>102</sup>—violence against women.

## Chapter Two Endnotes

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- <sup>41</sup> Arliss, Laurie P. *Gender Communication*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1991.p. 12
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 24
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 16
- <sup>44</sup> Robinson, Gertrude J. *Gender, Journalism and Equity: Canadian, U.S., and European Perspectives*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2005. p. 10-11
- <sup>45</sup> Byerly and Ross 2006. p. 18
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 40
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 65
- <sup>48</sup> “Pioneer female journalist Ishbel Ross tells a story about the origin of the term *sob sister* that has been picked up by many commentators. She claims the derogatory name dates from the 1907 trial of millionaire Harry K. Thaw who was accused of killing architect Stanford White for being his wife’s lover. Four female journalists covered the trial – Ada Patterson, Dorothy Dix, Winifred Black and Nixola Greeley-Smith. Male reporters believed that the only reason the four women reporters were there was to give the woman’s point of view, accusing them of sympathizing with the adulterous wife, Evelyn Nesbit Thaw. One male seeing the four at the press table, nicknamed them “sob sisters” and the name stuck.” Saltzman, 2003.
- <sup>49</sup> Byerly & Ross, 2006. p. 65-66
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 3
- <sup>51</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 9
- <sup>52</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 66
- <sup>53</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 1
- <sup>54</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 6
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 2
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 2
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 148
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 224
- <sup>59</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. P. 17
- <sup>60</sup> Shankman, *She Walks in Beauty*, 1991. P. 1
- <sup>61</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 19
- <sup>62</sup> Byerly and Ross 2006. p. 268
- <sup>63</sup> Shankman, *She Walks in Beauty*, 1991. p. 4
- <sup>64</sup> Shankman, *Now Let's Talk of Graves* 1990. p. 13

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- <sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 13
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 38
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 13-14
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 14
- <sup>69</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 126
- <sup>70</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 17
- <sup>71</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments* 1990. p. 178
- <sup>72</sup> Woods, *Ties That Bind*, 1991. p. 52
- <sup>73</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 162
- <sup>74</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 24
- <sup>75</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 4
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 5
- <sup>77</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 104
- <sup>78</sup> Bradley, Patricia, and Gail Collins. "Women and the Press: The Struggle for Equality." In *Visions of the American Press*, edited by David Abrahamson. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005. p. xix
- <sup>79</sup> Robinson 2005. p. 11
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 20
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 87
- <sup>82</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 117
- <sup>83</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 15
- <sup>84</sup> Woods, *Hide and Seek*, 1993. p. 2
- <sup>85</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 146
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid. pp. 69-70
- <sup>87</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 66-67
- <sup>88</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 58-59
- <sup>89</sup> Byerly and Ross 2006. p. 42
- <sup>90</sup> Shankman, *She Walks in Beauty*, 1991. pp. 6-7
- <sup>91</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments*, 1990. pp. 165-166
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 208
- <sup>93</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 33

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 37

<sup>95</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 206

<sup>96</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 144

<sup>97</sup> Woods, *Ties That Bind*, 1991. p. 232. George Tolliver bears no relation to editor Hoke Toliver featured in Shankman's novels.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p. 232

<sup>99</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 108

<sup>100</sup> Byerly and Ross 2006. p. 43

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 37

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p. 39

## **Chapter Three: One is the Loneliest Number**

*[T]here is something unreal about her: she has no living relatives, she travels alone, she lives alone, and the world she lives in seems to have no relation to the real world.*

—Donna Born, *The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction*

Unlike men who build friendships and “family” in a newsroom setting, the women of Woods’s and Shankman’s novels are often depicted as being alone. Fumbling over one obstacle after another, aspiring female reporters have had to battle “the male culture in newsrooms, family-workplace conflicts, a weakening economy (which means, among other things, fewer jobs) and male chauvinism among the very top executives—owners, presidents, publishers.”<sup>103</sup> For both men and women,

Journalism wreaks havoc on most personal relationships...Journalists usually end up alone in the big city without a family. Divorce rates...are astronomical. The only marriages that seem to work involve a man and a woman who are both working journalists. The only friends most newspeople have are the people who work with them.<sup>104</sup>

The higher women climb up the career ladder, the more alone they find themselves. Male colleagues doubt her intelligence, her skill, and her ambition. In the newsroom, “the woman is clearly inferior to the male, as evidenced either by ‘usual’ incompetence or by ‘unusual’ ability for a woman and by the rarity of women in the profession. Frequent reference is made to the ‘only one.’ She is the ‘only’ woman reporter at the paper.”<sup>105</sup> Female colleagues, when they exist, see her as competition or an enemy, never an ally, because they have taught themselves to work alone and to depend on no one to assure that their work is done accurately.

Another historical obstacle that has held women back from getting journalism degrees at the same rate as men is education, or lack thereof. The best journalism schools

did not allow women to enroll until years after they were created. When women were finally allowed a journalism education (post-Watergate), it was inferior to the training received by their male counterparts. Even textbooks and resources for journalism students were written *by* and *for* men.<sup>106</sup> This type of discrimination put women at a disadvantage from the start of their careers:

[W]omen were trained within a specific, narrow category of ‘women’s journalism,’ configured by the curriculum, textbooks and the attitudes of lecturers as marginal, if not subordinated. The fact that women were taught to write specifically *as* women and *for* women perpetuated the myth that to be a ‘real’ journalist, dealing in hard news, you had to be male.<sup>107</sup>

These obstacles facing aspiring female journalists do not end with the conferment of a degree. Issues of inequality—pay, treatment, beat assignments, etc.— still surface for women in the field today. And, unlike her male counterparts, women must make babysitter and daycare arrangements as well as fight the societal guilt placed on her for leaving her child for her work. Suddenly, the journalist/mother/wife is not the picture of the ideal worker—seen as *men* who are available on a whim, can travel with few arrangements, and can work late nights and long weekends without a second thought—but rather as a nine-to-five worker who has priorities at home that cannot be delayed. As a result, female reporters are primarily absent from the “pub tradition,” which is far more than a stress reliever. Rather it

extends the already long working day into the wee hours of the night and thus equates a reporter’s ‘competence’ with total availability...drinking bouts, where the ‘old boys network’ is created and sustained. The evidence shows that this network informally influences work assignments, affects promotions and also creates gendered work-role expectations.<sup>108</sup>

After work, the journalist/mother/wife cannot go to the local bar and grab a drink with the other male reporters because she, unlike her colleagues, has a second shift to get home to.

Attempting to piece together their varied roles, female reporters try “to reconcile professional excellence with success as a woman, to find personal fulfillment both in the profession and in a personal relationship.”

Roberts constantly attempts to reconcile her role as an independent investigative reporter, a newly single woman, a new face in a new in town, and far from her parents. Though Roberts does spend a majority of time alone, it is not new: “She had always worked alone. This was no time to be changing that successful pattern.”<sup>109</sup> Her editor, Cates, and even the publisher of the magazine, Joel Crenshaw, leave Roberts alone to do reporting on her own terms.<sup>110</sup> At work, Roberts is even cornered off away from the other reporters in her own private office where “she had access to news stories on file from a wide range of sources, all indexed, all available in hard copy at the push of a button.”<sup>111</sup> Her status as the *only* female reporter, and her relative success at being a newsroom anomaly, grant her privacies that further isolate her from all of her co-workers, except one, her secretary Jenny Lee. Their interactions, while friendly, seem more like a mentorship than a friendship among equals. While this female friendship is beneficial (Roberts dispenses relationship advice to Lee in return for copies, faxes, phone calls, and note-taking), it is hardly a partnership of equals.

Roberts is the only female reporter on staff until the final novel of the series, where she meets her match in assignment editor Carol Fields. Readers see for the first time in the nine total novels how Roberts co-exists in the newsroom with another woman, and their first meeting does not go well. With just one look, Roberts pits Fields as her competition rather than a potential ally in an all-male newsroom: “Amanda took a surreptitious peek at Carol Fields on her way across the newsroom. She could tell at once

that they were going to have problems.”<sup>112</sup> This first interaction become hostile when Fields orders Roberts to write stories that will draw in high-end advertisers, thereby going against Roberts’s no-frills approach to reporting. The presence of another woman not only impedes Roberts’s reporting style, but also places both women in unfamiliar territory. They are not the “only ones” in the newsroom anymore, and their dominant personalities collide and reinforce the idea that women cannot compete without becoming enemies.

At home, Roberts tries to merge her bachelorette lifestyle with her role as a new wife. Her marriage forces Roberts to truly reconcile and balance the two major loves of her life: Donelli and journalism. Woods writes:

Roberts had always thought of herself in terms of her toughness and independence. Thank heavens she’d realized in time that that didn’t mean she had to go through life alone. For the first time in years, wrapping up her story wasn’t the primary thing on her mind as she headed home. Tonight, all she wanted was to be in her husband’s arms...<sup>113</sup>

This scene is crucial to Roberts’s character development. It is arguably the first time the reader sees a reconciliation of the personal and professional for Roberts who, until now, chose to go through life alone.

Adams is also the “only one” at the *Constitution*—the only one who works her own hours, makes her own appointments,<sup>114</sup> and does things her own way. Her editor even questions his star reporter’s freedom in a profession that relies on a chain of command:

TOLIVER: You think because you won all those prizes and the Big Boy hired you at an annual fee bigger than a high-class hooker’s—and with more perks—you can just go off and do what you want?

ADAMS: *She smiled.* That’s the way my contract reads, boss.<sup>115</sup>

Adams's past successes have made her the only one in the office exempt from editorial control, and these visible privileges cause resentment among her colleagues

who had to work within the system, answering to the assistant city editor, coming into the office every day, taking assignments rather than playing it by ear and sniffing out their own stories, then following them to the ground. If she were on their side of the fence, she'd hate her guts, too.<sup>116</sup>

Adams cannot form newsroom alliances or friendships because of these distinct privileges that threaten her colleagues by placing them in direct competition with the only woman in the newsroom.

Readers see an opportunity for teamwork when Adams meets Harry Zack, a young insurance investigator who is investigating the death of one of his company's clients. But when Adams and Zack step on each other's toes while interviewing the same sources, her desire to dominate and control all the elements of the investigation shows her unfamiliarity and unwillingness to work with another. When Zack refuses to share some recently gathered information with her, she responds, "Fuck him. She was way ahead of him anyway...She could handle this like she handled everything else. By herself, thank you."<sup>117</sup> Though Adams recognizes this part of her personality to be a "flaw," always dealing with investigations *alone* has enabled her to succeed and thrive within a competitive journalistic culture. Adams clings to the one thing that got her to the *Constitution* in the first place—calling her own shots—and she recognizes that "there were just some times she couldn't be a team player."<sup>118</sup>

Although Adams's solitude is a conscious choice during investigations, there is one type of loneliness that she does not choose—familial. Orphaned as a child by the death of her parents in a plane crash, the only semblance of family Adams has ever

known is created by her uncle and his housekeeper. After being dumped and abandoned by boyfriends, lovers, and husbands, Adams constantly fights feelings of familial loneliness and abandonment. She finds support from a friend named Kitty Lee who lives in Louisiana and has no affiliation with journalism whatsoever;<sup>119</sup> but, she is able to provide a distant support system for Adam who has no professional allies except for her editor.

Overall, the two characters comprise an image of the female journalist in fiction who is proud of her independence, although she might not be proud of how she got it—whether through heartbreak, death of family members and lovers, abandonment, or friendlessness. On the other hand, her solitude and desire to do things her own way bucks traditional stereotypes of femininity that say women should be meek, passive, and told what to do in both the public and private spheres. Her higher education pedigrees—Roberts received a journalism degree from Columbia and a law degree from Harvard, and Adams graduated from both Emory and Stanford universities—aligns her with the top men in the field, or perhaps surpasses them. (Both Roberts and Adams certainly have a better education than their editors.) Her education makes her overqualified for the stories her editor wants her to write and intimidates and emasculates her male co-workers.

The mythology of the lonely journalist persists in these novels even though both characters try to strike a balance through their personal relationships with family and lovers. Roberts and Adams “embody...what it means to be a journalist...alone, cynical, hardworking, ready to do anything for the paper or news program even if it means giving up a personal life.”<sup>120</sup> Professional and personal reconciliation does occur, adding yet another layer to “the dichotomy of the female reporter—she is considered an equal by

doing a man's job, a career woman...arguing toe-to-toe with any male in the shop, holding her own against everyone and everything," yet she permits herself to be vulnerable to a love that changes her priorities and reshapes her definition of success. Roberts and Adams finally understand that they do not have to sacrifice everything to be the "only ones." Even as they burst through the glass ceiling to find they are alone at the top of their newsroom hierarchies, they are not journeying through life alone.

## Chapter Three Endnotes

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<sup>103</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 83

<sup>104</sup> Saltzman, 2002. p. 184-185

<sup>105</sup> Born 1981. p. 14

<sup>106</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 72

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 81

<sup>108</sup> Robinson 2005. p. 87

<sup>109</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 53

<sup>110</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 57

<sup>111</sup> Woods, *Ties That Bind*, 1991. p. 137

<sup>112</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 63

<sup>113</sup> Woods, *Wages of Sin*, 1994. p. 250

<sup>114</sup> Sam to George: “[J]ust because I work my own hours, George, doesn’t mean that you should make appointments for me!” Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 25

<sup>115</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars*, 1989. p. 38

<sup>116</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 38

<sup>117</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars*, 1989. p. 203

<sup>118</sup> Shankman, *Now Let's Talk of Graves*, 1990. p. 296

<sup>119</sup> Kitty Lee was Sam Adams’s roommate at Stanford University. Adams meets up with Lee in *Now Let's Talk of Graves* for a Mardi Gras celebration gone wrong. Overall, Lee appears to support Adams’s demanding journalism career. Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 1990

<sup>120</sup> Saltzman, 2002. p. 185

## **Chapter Four: Front Page Girls: Attire, Ethics, and Investigation**

*They offered themselves as mediators between their readers and the city, deliberately embracing situations in which the female body was likely to be viewed as suspect, oversexed, out of control.*

—Jean Marie Lutes, *Front-page Girls*

Despite the heavy influence of romance and mystery genres in each series, a great deal of time is spent describing Adams and Roberts on the job. Detailed descriptions of each woman interviewing sources, commuting to and from interviews, or putting in late hours at home create a foundation upon which each character builds her reputation in journalism. Newsgathering also becomes the stimulus for most of the major plot events. Roberts's and Adams's love interests come, most often, secondary to their deadlines. Donna Born writes, "The stories deal primarily with the problems and concerns of their professions: becoming a journalist, interviewing or investigating and doing the research for a story, making professional decisions, and reconciling the image of a journalist with the traditional image of woman."<sup>121</sup> This chapter analyzes three major aspects of the characters' newsgathering process: their attire and how that affects their image; their methods of newsgathering and ethical violations they make, and, finally, the ways they integrate and co-op the privileges of two separate professions—reporter and detective.

### **Attire**

*Looks should neither attract nor distract. Ideally, a reporter's appearance should just be pleasant enough to be disregarded...I have decided to quit apologizing for my looks, which have played both a positive and negative role in my career. I have my own theory that attractive people in the industry are considered bad journalists; average looking reporters are automatically given more credence.*

—Jessica Savitch (1982)<sup>122</sup>

In Born's examination of the image of the female journalist in fiction from 1890 to 1980, she writes:

Evidently women's dress revealed a great deal about their abilities as journalists. In the fiction of this period is first seen the problem that confronts the woman journalist through the fiction from 1890 to the present day: how does the woman reconcile the demands of her profession with the demands of the cultural stereotype?<sup>123</sup>

Indeed, a woman of this time was expected to dress according to her femininity, but journalism's job requirements are not conducive to this type of attire. Dresses and high-heeled shoes are not appropriate for hitting the streets, chasing down sources, or being taken seriously as a female reporter. The goal for the characters that comprise Born's analysis was to be sexy, stylish, but still professional all at once. Later, as the women's movement introduced more rights and freedoms into the lives of American women, they began to redefine their closets, thereby influencing dress expectations in the workplace. Clothing sends a message, and certainly, what a female reporter chooses to wear can affect a myriad of factors—workplace interactions, first impressions, garnering respect during interviews with sources, and her reputation within her community. Judgments are made about a woman's sexuality, self-confidence, and identity based on attire, which is why it is important to note that neither Woods nor Shankman place great emphasis on their character's outward appearances. But, in the few scenes that do provide descriptions about their attire, it becomes clear that these women stray from wearing feminine attire and choose instead, clothes with a masculine twist. For example, when Adams meets her uncle at her favorite Atlanta bar known for catering to the city's high-class businessmen in nice suits, she enters with her own version of the male tuxedo:

George stared down at Samantha's bow tie. It was one of those not-quite-a-tie-not-quite-a-scarf affairs that women dressed for success wear, but a big green-and-black polka-dot one that was great with her silk blouse, antique black tuxedo jacket, and a pencil-slim white linen skirt. 'You look wonderful, my dear, but what are we going to do with you?'<sup>124</sup>

Her uncle's bemused reaction to Adams's outfit symbolizes the very thin line of gendered power she is walking on. A woman like Adams sees her male-inspired ensemble as a symbol of success, but, in the male-dominated space, her clothing signals to the bar's male patrons that she is a competitor who is not afraid to overstep recognized codes of conduct assigned to women and to assert herself with power and confidence.

In the bar, Adams's clothes present her as an equal in what might be an intimidating space for women. But, in another scene, her attire takes on a completely different meaning by hyper-sexualizing her body. While having a serious conversation with her editor, Adams's silky green blouse takes her editor's focus off the topic at hand:

TOLIVER: [Y]ou Commie-pinko bra-burning vegetarian lesbian *Pravda*-stringer.

ADAMS: I am *not* a bra-burner." *Hoke leaned forward on his elbows with a loosey-goosey smile, making her aware that her green silk blouse was just a little too snug.*

TOLIVER: No, you aren't, are you?<sup>125</sup>

Without her masculine attire, Adams's body becomes a playground for sexual innuendo and objectification. The dialogue about the cling of her green blouse and the way it hugs her feminine form opens the door for sexual harassment. Toliver's "loosey-goosey smile" not only makes Adams feel uncomfortable about her own body but also gives validity to the argument that women should embrace a more masculine workplace wardrobe in order to garner respect and divert attention toward intelligence rather than body parts.

Adams's counterpart, Roberts, has a casual wardrobe that fits her down-and-dirty personality and reporting style, though it does not bode well with newsroom decorum. When she meets the new female assignment editor, Carol Fields, for the first time, Roberts's clothing choices are compared to more conservative, formal, and old-fashioned

rules for work attire. For the first time, readers see Roberts compared to a woman quite her opposite:

[Amanda] wasn't sure she could relate to anyone who didn't have a single blonde hair out of place and who dressed in an expensive black power suit and Tiffany-caliber gold jewelry to run a small, previously friendly, informal magazine newsroom. The assignment editor's expression as she surveyed Amanda's wind-tossed hairstyle, jeans, silk shirt, and blazer indicated a similar dismay, though obviously for the opposite reason.<sup>126</sup>

After Fields, a former feature writer at another magazine, introduces her to the magazine's new dress code, Roberts confronts her about the decision to make "real" reporters dress in formal attire:

ROBERTS: Tell me, Carol, when was the last time you reported a story?...

FIELDS: I spent ten years as a reporter before becoming an editor...

ROBERTS: Covering what? Police? The courts? Breaking news? Washington, perhaps? *Patches of color flared in the other woman's cheeks.*

FIELDS: Actually I was in the feature section of a daily paper in Birmingham.

ROBERTS: Ah, I see. *Amanda closed in for the kill.* Then most likely you almost never had to climb over a fence to chase a source or run half a mile to get away from a crazed murderer, *she said.* Perhaps in features you could afford to dress in what you refer to as professional attire. No doubt the kind of people you interviewed dressed in power suits of their own. I prefer to dress in clothes that will not impede my progress or intimidate the daylights out of my sources.<sup>127</sup>

In this scene, meanings are attached to the clothing, and the women who wear them. For Roberts, stiff black suits, gold jewelry, and high heels are not sure-fire signs of a good reporter; she is the antithesis of Fields, donning her silk blouse, blazer, and blue jeans that help her to be both comfortable and productive. Roberts's concerns about what constitutes "professional" attire point to several workplace distinctions between beat

reporters and feature writers, source-conscious versus self-conscious reporters, and reporters who inherently produce better work because they are not afraid to literally get dirty on the job.

Perhaps Adams and Roberts might agree with Born's observation that the way a woman dresses *does* reflect on her ability as a journalist, or at least the way she is *perceived* in the profession. In both characters' attempts to negotiate and balance expectations of female attire with the requirements of newsroom attire, they experience either sexism or criticism. (It can be argued that both sexism and criticism are ways to try to force these unruly women back into their place.) If the women wear power suits, they are either too formal or dressed inappropriately for their reporting style, thereby making them uncomfortable in the field. On the other hand, more feminine attire distracts from their reporting and shifts the focus to their sexualized bodies. Adams and Roberts use clothing protectively, covering themselves from inappropriate glances and comments that take the focus away from their reporting and put it on their bodies. The clothing described in these novels is a manifestation of the characters' desires to strike a balance between gendered character traits in which these beautiful women balance their striking features with masculine clothing in order to succeed.

### ***Ethics***

*[A]mbitious, ruthless, ice-cold, shrewd, unscrupulous, power hungry, willing to do anything for a story—but she is also femininely charming, beautiful, manipulative, calculating, and “well-stacked,” a combination that got her “everywhere.”*

—Donna Born, *The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction*

In order to adequately perform its major duty as a check on powerful institutions and people, journalism revolves around an axis of ethics. The Society of Professional

Journalists, the nation's most recognized and respected journalism-related organizations, has a Code of Ethics that is

voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behavior. The code is intended not as a set of "rules" but as a resource for ethical decision-making. It is not — nor can it be under the First Amendment — legally enforceable.”<sup>128</sup>

Some of the major ethical tenets covered by SPJ's Code of Ethics such as seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable<sup>129</sup> are considered in this analysis. Because Adams and Shankman are fictional characters, they are allowed to operate by a set of rules that would be deemed inappropriate outside of the reader's mind. In fiction, reporters do not have to attain their information ethically, and the fictional worlds created for these characters thrive on their ethical transgressions to keep interest piqued, readers on their toes, and the plot advancing. This chapter is divided into three major subgroups that relate to the characters' ethical behavior: romancing the source, misrepresentation, and the reporter-detective conflict.

### ***Romancing the Source***

One of the biggest transgressions a journalist can commit is cultivating unprofessional relationships, friendships, and romances with sources, and no character is more guilty of this than Roberts. According to SPJ's Code of Ethics, journalists should

avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived; remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility; refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel, and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office, and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.<sup>130</sup>

Remaining completely objective, neutral, and unattached are the easiest ways to keep out of trouble and uphold a publication's reputation. There is a sense of accountability that

exists between reporters and editors that is built on trust. This dynamic is expressed in a short scene in which Roberts's editor makes sure he and Roberts are on the same page before she races out the door to cover a murder:

CATES: What is one of the first tenets of good journalism? *he asked in a professional tone...*

ROBERTS: Objectivity, *she said.*

CATES: Objectivity, *he repeated, obviously pleased that she recalled the concept.* No preconceived notions. No emotional ties to the story. No conflict of interest. Right?

ROBERTS: Yes.<sup>131</sup>

Despite her training on "objectivity," Roberts is accused by both her editor and boyfriend Joe Donelli of violating ethical codes of conduct by leading her sources on romantically or with the prospect of friendship in order to get information for a story. When confronted about the impact this behavior might have on her integrity, Roberts responds, "I'll get cozy with whomever I damn well please."<sup>132</sup> She is sassy, defiant, and defensive in response to having her integrity questioned.

After another interview, Donelli, who is watching from nearby, questions Roberts's intentions with her male source: "[Y]ou were supposed to be getting information, not getting into bed with the guy..." to which Roberts responds that she was just "Trying to get some answers."<sup>133</sup> Whether Roberts knows she is giving mixed signals is unclear, but from the perspective of a bystander, Roberts's behavior is inappropriate and misleading. Arguably, Roberts knows the consequences of betraying the public's trust by forming an inappropriate relationship or leading on a source, but she defends herself, and her intentions:

When I'm caught up in the story, I damn well care about the people affected, whether it's society as a whole or one individual...It's my way of fighting injustice and sometimes, I'll admit, I play dirty. I hope to God you can live with that, because I don't think I could ever change.<sup>134</sup>

In her admission to playing “dirty,” Roberts shows no signs of apology nor does she act as if her career and reputation are in danger. For Roberts, crossing boundaries of “acceptable” reporter-source relationships are a part of her job that her employer and boyfriend will have to accept because she will change for no one.

### ***Misrepresentation and Surreptitious Newsgathering***

Misrepresentation and covert newsgathering are two main violations of journalistic integrity. The SPJ Code of Ethics advises reporters to “Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public.”<sup>135</sup> Yet, both Roberts and Adams frequently misrepresent themselves to gain insight or information while on the job. Roberts, for instance, misrepresents herself on the phone to a source's secretary<sup>136</sup> in order to get a callback. Adams misrepresents herself to Sheriff Dodd, claiming her name is Susan Sloan, a married woman looking for a tax auction, in order to get into his office and investigate the sheriff's rumored illegal activity.<sup>137</sup> On another occasion, Adams enters a local Atlanta strip club to find out about some of its underage workers. She lies to the employee about her identity, calling herself Sheryl Bach, an ad representative for *The Peachtree Ad-Visor*. She even presents a fake business card.<sup>138</sup> Adams also lies to the mother of a murder suspect to gain access to her home and ask questions. This time, Adams uses the alias Dana Edwin and goes heavy on the Southern accent to intensify the deception.<sup>139</sup>

Aside from lying about their true identities to get an angle for a story, Roberts and

Adams also betray their sources' trust by obtaining information without their knowledge or consent. Although Roberts claims that she is not a "sneaky reporter"<sup>140</sup> and touts her "journalistic obligation to protect her sources,"<sup>141</sup> her actions sometimes prove otherwise. In one instance, she sneaks into a suspect's home and slips copies of real estate documents pertinent to her story into her purse.<sup>142</sup> On another occasion, she uses a credit card and bobby pins to break into a suspect's office,<sup>143</sup> and, after finding suspicious evidence against him, hides a tape recorder in her purse during their next interview.<sup>144</sup> Adams engages in similar behavior by breaking into a suspicious home using her Saks Fifth Avenue credit card<sup>145</sup> and promising her source a job with the *Constitution* in return for a list of possible suspects who run an illegal strip club featuring some of Atlanta's most prominent underage debutantes.<sup>146</sup>

Roberts even goes so far as to break and enter in a last-ditch effort to find out information. Justifying her actions, she tells her wary secretary that she is not going to steal things, just "check things out." Woods writes, "It was a fine distinction, but she thought a rather important one. She doubted the police would agree."<sup>147</sup> Later, when her editor finds out, Roberts receives a slap on the wrist followed by complete disregard:

CATES: Reporters don't break and enter. At least my reporters don't. is that clear?...So, what'd you find? *Amanda bit back a grin. Despite the dutiful lecture on ethics, Oscar occasionally displayed the sensibilities of a tabloid journalist who was only one step above digging for clues in celebrity garbage. If he was aware of the dichotomy, he'd never acknowledge it.*<sup>148</sup>

In truth, neither Roberts nor her editor acknowledges her ethical violations beyond this point. There is no punishment or any repercussion on Roberts's career, and this behavior, which is absolutely not condoned in real newsrooms, is glossed over in a "business as usual" manner. Rather than being subjected to the laws of the government or the

newsroom, Roberts takes her information and continues on with her front-page article. The dichotomy of these portrayals—the sneaky, ruthless reporter and the law-abiding, ethical reporter—constructs images that are empowering and degrading all at once. This “contradictory portrayal of the journalist as part hero, part scoundrel can be found in American popular literature of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries,”<sup>149</sup> and is a definite element in the fiction of Woods and Shankman.

### ***Reporter-Detective Conflict***

*Let me remind you that I am not a private investigator. I am an investigative reporter.*

—Sarah Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers*

Roberts and Adams share one of the most common characterizations of fictional reporters: the reporter as detective. This characterization has evolved into a popular image for fictional reporters because

both the journalist and the detective are curious inquirers trying to solve a mystery, whether it be a crime or a complex, unknown story. They are both trying to piece together the various aspects of a puzzle, to come up with a reasonable conclusion as to what happened, where it happened, and to whom it happened, combined with the more difficult aspects of the story or case—how it happened and why it happened.<sup>150</sup>

By this description, and by the fiction featuring reporters, it is easy to see how the two distinct images of reporter and detective have been melded and assimilated into a single image. Just because this image is popular, however, does not mean that it is not problematic or accurate. Often, the characters align themselves with the expectations of each profession without undergoing the required training. What makes this fusion more fascinating, however, is the natural tension that exists between reporters and detectives who are often at odds with each other throughout the course of each series.

In one novel, for example, Roberts characterizes the relationship between reporters and detectives as one of instinctive repulsion: “Detectives and reporters were natural enemies. She could sense the presence of one the way a deer could sniff the scent of a hunter.”<sup>151</sup> At the root of this constant conflict is information and confidentiality. The reporters fight the detectives, and vice versa, for the information needed to solve the crime at hand and/or write a hard-hitting investigative story. Often, Adams and Roberts are shown withholding information from police in order to gain the upper hand in the tenuous relationship. On the other hand, when Roberts *does* cooperate with an investigation, she gets burned:

DETECTIVE: You’ve already had more access to this investigation than I’d like. From here on out, you’ll wait for the releases and press conferences just like the rest of the media. *So much for gratitude and cooperation. She’d turned over all of her information and what did she get in return? A brush-off.*<sup>152</sup>

These incidents further fuel the rivalry between reporters and detectives and make newsgathering/fact-gathering more of a competition than a public service. But when the tables are turned and it is the reporter who needs information from authorities, cooperation is not reciprocated. In a particular scene, Roberts is trying to persuade FBI agent Jeffrey Dunne to give her a piece of confidential information. He responds, “[W]hat really irks me, Amanda, is your infantile refusal to admit that some things are more important than the media’s right to access every piece of information in the universe on demand.”<sup>153</sup>

Besides freezing reporters out of investigations, another technique used by detectives when going head-to-head with journalists is using the power of the law to

intimidate. For example, when Roberts confronts FBI agent Jeffrey Dunne, he threatens to imprison her:

ROBERTS: I have evidence and, by God, I've got brains, which is more than I can say for you...

DUNNE: Contrary to what you might think, I have all my wits about me. I am also fully aware of your reputation, Ms. Roberts, and I'd like to offer you a little piece of advice. Stay out of my investigation or I'll slap you behind bars. From what I've observed from the journalistic profession, that might put a slight crimp into your career as well.<sup>154</sup>

For Roberts, this strategy does not bode well with her sense of entitlement, which often clouds the realization that she does not have a badge of her own. This interaction affects Roberts's further decisions to hand over evidence and leads to the police and is later "convinced that it would be her duty to carry the investigation to its logical conclusion before turning the evidence over to the authorities."<sup>155</sup> This type of above-the-law activity becomes commonplace throughout each work.

Ironically, Roberts and Adams are often misconstrued as detectives while out in the field. The community sees these women as "crimebusters" and "crusaders," but they are rarely depicted as "scandal mongers," a title left for the law enforcement figures (often portrayed as corrupt, bigoted, and sexist) in each novel. To their own dismay, Roberts and Adams are asked to hold the law accountable while temporarily *becoming* the law, thereby making them a professional and ethical paradox.<sup>156</sup> Such stark contradictions between reporters and detectives create a problem for these reporters who are expected by their fellow citizens to act as both reporters and police detectives/private eyes. Certainly, "dividing reporters into crimebusters or crusaders or scandal mongers creates a whole host of problems because often they are the same journalist being all three."<sup>157</sup>

Roberts's and Adams's reputations as investigative reporters create unrealistic expectations from the public they serve. In Roberts's case, two of the novels revolve around an elderly character named Miss Ellie Mae Taylor and her unique relationship with Roberts. As a wealthy, prominent member of Atlanta's high society, Miss Taylor hires Roberts to investigate personal crimes committed against her and her circle of friends. Not only does Roberts become a mouthpiece for a private citizen, she also has to combat Miss Taylor's expectations that she will always solve the case, stop the murderer in his tracks, or help police imprison the criminal. In one scene, Miss Taylor calls Roberts before dawn and demands that she come over to her home to proceed with the investigation:

ROBERTS: I am not a private eye.

MISS TAYLOR: You are an investigative reporter, aren't you? If I called those TV reporters on '60 Minutes,' they'd get here quick enough.<sup>158</sup>

Frustrated by Miss Taylor's continued unrealistic expectations, Roberts realizes that Miss Taylor does not "fully understand the fine distinctions between the two occupations"<sup>159</sup> while admitting that she is not the "journalistic equivalent of Sherlock Holmes."<sup>160</sup>

Despite their resistance to being categorized as detectives, both Roberts and Adams exert detective-like abilities and knowledge. They both know their way around the law—and its loopholes—and also know how to follow it. Roberts even attended law school so that she could "go after the big guys, too." She says, "I just wanted to nail them in print with enough evidence that no court could overlook it. I figured it would help if I understood all the rules."<sup>161</sup> Both Roberts's and Adams's higher education and on-the-job training have familiarized them with local and federal laws—for example, laws surrounding public and private records—and protocols that might trip up other reporters.

Adams and Roberts, through their simultaneous rejection and acceptance of their role as reporter-detectives, adopt traits that “conflict with the contemporary cultural attitudes of women as projected in the mass media, which portrays women to be passive, incompetent, frivolous and dependent on men for their self-fulfillment.”<sup>162</sup> Roberts and Adams do not need men (read: the *real* detectives in the novels) because they have all the tools the need to solve the case already, sans the badge. They navigate their femininity and their press passes in a professional gray zone that posits them as neither a whole reporter nor a whole detective, but rather a distorted hybrid of them both.

## Chapter Four Endnotes

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- <sup>121</sup> Born 1981. p. 7
- <sup>122</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 58
- <sup>123</sup> Born 1981. p. 8
- <sup>124</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 50
- <sup>125</sup> Ibid. p. 3
- <sup>126</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 63
- <sup>127</sup> Ibid. p. 65-66
- <sup>128</sup> Society of Professional Journalists, 1996
- <sup>129</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>130</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>131</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. pp. 183-84
- <sup>132</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 123
- <sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 138
- <sup>134</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 72
- <sup>135</sup> Society of Professional Journalists, 1996.
- <sup>136</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 186
- <sup>137</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 165
- <sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 46
- <sup>139</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 87
- <sup>140</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 7
- <sup>141</sup> Ibid. p. 18
- <sup>142</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments* 1990. p. 212
- <sup>143</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 275-276
- <sup>144</sup> Ibid. p. 297
- <sup>145</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 149
- <sup>146</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 118
- <sup>147</sup> Woods, *Bank On It*, 1993. p. 57
- <sup>148</sup> Woods, *Bank On It*, 1993. p. 57

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<sup>149</sup> Saltzman 2002. p. 177

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 181

<sup>151</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 14

<sup>152</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 223

<sup>153</sup> Woods, *Hide and Seek*, 1993. pp. 49-50

<sup>154</sup> Woods, *Ties That Bind*, 1991. pp. 113-14

<sup>155</sup> Woods, *Reckless* 1989. p. 146

<sup>156</sup> “Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived; remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.” Society of Professional Journalists, 1996.

<sup>157</sup> Saltzman 2002. p. 181

<sup>158</sup> Woods, *Stolen Moments* 1990. p. 45

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. p. 130

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p. 131

<sup>161</sup> Woods, *Ties That Bind*, 1991. p. 121

<sup>162</sup> Born 1981. p. 26

## **Chapter Five: Publicity from Publication: Public Voices, Public Bodies**

*Women reporters were called upon to mediate a violent, contradictory narrative, and their bodies, along with their words, helped to serve their ends.*

—Jean Marie Lutes, *Front-page Girls*

One distinctive quality that separates female journalists from their male counterparts is the integration of their physical bodies and the news they report. Female journalists like Roberts and Adams find that “they are not only deliverers but objects of news.”<sup>163</sup> The fact that they are women in off-limits public spaces makes them newsworthy because they represent an evolution in the representation and distribution of news. In a social system that associates serious news coverage—murder, robbery, business, war coverage, and high society scandal—with male journalists, Roberts’s and Adams’s success and notoriety on male-dominated beats makes them an anomaly and a source of publicity for their media companies. This chapter examines the ways in which Roberts and Adams are forced to become public along with their stories. To succeed, they must make a name for their publications and for themselves, subjecting themselves to public scrutiny and celebrity status in the process.

While the characters sometimes face publicity that derives from their beauty,<sup>164</sup> there are many circumstances where they become known because of their participation in the news. Like the stunt reporters of the past, Roberts and Adams play a part in the news in order to successfully gather it.

For men, participatory journalism was a choice; for women, it was one of the few ways to break out of the women’s pages. Even women writers who avoided stunts and covered unstaged ‘hard’ news, such as murders, fires, train wrecks, and political conflicts, often found themselves in the spotlight.<sup>165</sup>

While the news they cover is unstaged, both Roberts and Adams become actors and participants in the action leading up to the printed feature. The choice to either be *involved* with the news or to be a third-party *observer* and reporter of the news does not exist for these women. These female reporters enter the news “to ease the uncertainty and alienation of urban life by using their bodies as conduits for the news, projecting themselves into their stories and thus into their readers’ lives.”<sup>166</sup> Because the news they report comes from women the public trusts and knows, both the characters and their articles are deemed newsworthy.

Another area of publicity found in each series arises from the characters’ reputations. Roberts is often referred to as a “maverick reporter,”<sup>167</sup> while Adams comes to be known as a “renowned girl reporter.”<sup>168</sup> The women move through their communities as public figures who have no anonymity because of their bylines and their beauty.<sup>169</sup> “[N]o matter how ‘straight’ their news, how ‘rigid and conservative’ their style, and how much ‘dignity and honor’ they invested in their stories, they [can]not achieve the disembodied anonymity of the objective journalist.”<sup>170</sup> These women do not even have to introduce themselves to strangers because everyone already knows who they are, who they work for, and the successes of their past. For example, when Adams attends a party and introduces herself to the hostess, she receives this response: “Why, *everybody* knows you. What with the fantastic work you’ve done in the past year, there’s never going to be any hiding your light under a bushel. My dear, you’re a *star!*”<sup>171</sup>

As an “emblem of publicity,” Adams and other female reporters are “identified with and through the process of making public their images and words. They [function] as both agents and pawns in this process.”<sup>172</sup> In turn, they model “a new kind of

authorship for their readers...They [advance] a model of the woman writer as unapologetically, even triumphantly embodied, a writer whose physical presence at an event [becomes] an integral part of the news, a writer who [is] on display first when she [is] gathering the news and again in the text of her reports.”<sup>173</sup> This emboldened style of reporting not only publicizes the female reporter’s physical body, but also the news outlet for which she works. To earn publicity, Roberts and Adams must make their presence known at grisly murder scenes thought to be out of the league of female reporters and then write an unmatched breaking story. The sacrifice for bearing this type of news, however, is submitting their bodies to the public gaze as “They confront the corruption themselves, resist it, and maintain both physical and psychological integrity.”<sup>174</sup>

## Chapter Five Endnotes

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<sup>163</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 3

<sup>164</sup> Roberts signs up for a cooking class in order to interview Jean-Claude, a French chef and potential source. Although she tries to remain anonymous, Jean-Claude recognizes her immediately, saying: “You are a beautiful woman, mademoiselle. How could one possibly forget such a face?” Roberts’s beauty (and body) beat her to every interaction and location, thanks to her publicity as a successful female journalist in a small-town atmosphere that notices the sudden appearance of a beautiful woman.

<sup>165</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 2

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. p. 6

<sup>167</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 60

<sup>168</sup> Shankman, *First Kill All the Lawyers* 1988. p. 31

<sup>169</sup> “Sometimes journalists rather than remaining impartial, colorless, factual transmitters of news, become celebrities themselves.” Abramson, 1990. p. 1

<sup>170</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 42

<sup>171</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars* 1989. p. 27

<sup>172</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 6

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. p. 7

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. p. 36

## **Chapter Six: Caught Between Love and a Hard Place**

*The independent sob sister gets what she secretly pines for...the love of an honest man.*

—Joe Saltzman, *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film*

No reporter-fiction is complete without a bit of romance, and authors Woods and Shankman do not disappoint readers. Soft embraces, passionate kisses, and steamy love scenes surface in the texts at one time or another; but, rather than turning these scenes into bawdy affairs, they force the characters to examine the work-home balance in their lives as they settle into monogamous relationships with men they love.

Roberts's husband, Joe Donelli, proves to be a constant and protective presence during her investigations. A former detective himself, Donelli knows the dangers of criminal investigations and tries hard to be her knight-in-shining-armor in times of need. While he respects Roberts's love for her career, he spends much of his time begging her to be more cautious:

[Donelli] tolerated her chosen career for her sake, but he'd made it clear on more than one occasion that he would prefer it if she took up knitting instead...Actually, she supposed it was not her occupation Donelli objected to so much as the way she went about it. She tended to plunge in the middle of things regardless of the danger. It made for great copy, but it had also resulted in a few hair-raising incidents...<sup>175</sup>

Donelli worries about Roberts's tendency to put herself in danger and serves as her moral compass when she would rather be a rogue reporter. Donelli even befriends Roberts's editor, Oscar Cates, and tries to sway him to give his best reporter safer stories to pursue. Eventually, Donelli and Cates form a close friendship that revolves around their team effort to keep Roberts between the lines. When Roberts poses a story topic that could involve potential danger, Cates asks, "What does Donelli say?" to which Roberts decries,

“Joe Donelli does not put his foot down where my career is concerned.”<sup>176</sup> Despite her deep commitment to Donelli, Roberts proclaims that her love life and work life will not mix under any circumstances. Struggling to keep her mind and heart separate, Woods writes, “Donelli might possess a chunk of her heart, but he’d never control her actions. Intellectually he understood that. But it still grated on his macho streak.”<sup>177</sup> And even when reporting on a story threatens her life and Donelli’s manhood, Roberts will not let her husband interfere with her career. She pleads, “I know why you want me to stop, but I can’t. Please, Joe, don’t make me choose between my career and pleasing you.”<sup>178</sup>

Roberts’s last statement isolates a major concern that many working wives and mothers voice when trying to balance their time, energy, and resources between the public and private spheres. While many women, like Roberts, find productive ways to manage success in the workplace and in their relationships, Adams is an example of a woman who gives up her career to further pursue a romantic relationship. When she meets up with her boyfriend Harry Zack in New Orleans, she decides on a whim to quit her job at the Atlanta paper to move to Louisiana with him. In her words, “She was out of here. Love was short. Life was long. She was gone.”<sup>179</sup> The series ends with Adams’s resignation.

### ***Scorning the Traditional: Marriage and Motherhood***

While both Adams and Roberts crave love and affection and give way to monogamous relationships, they both scorn the idea of motherhood. Neither views herself as a “domestic” woman, and time is dedicated to the persistent thought each character has that reminds them that they are *not* motherhood “material.” For example, when Adams is on the phone with Harry, she warns him: “you’d better give some serious

thought to hooking up with a woman ten years your elder, especially one who had skipped the line where they were handing out the mommy genes.”<sup>180</sup> Her comment implies a few things: (1) that all men want a woman who wants to become a mother; (2) that maternal instincts are genetic; (3) that women who choose not to become a mother are somehow going against nature.

Roberts, like Adams, never warms up to the idea of motherhood until a positive pregnancy test rocks her world. Just settling into her marriage with Donelli, Roberts is finally proud of her “new domestication,” even though she is in constant fear of failing. But when she finds out that she is pregnant (surprise!), Roberts goes from being confused and upset by her carelessness (“I’m an intelligent woman. I have a college degree, plus a law degree. You’d think I could do something as simple as protecting myself from pregnancy.”<sup>181</sup>) to proactive:

All at once her journalistic training kicked in, her compulsive need for information went into overdrive. She needed books on pregnancy, books on parenting. A few days of research in a library wouldn’t hurt either. She could track down articles on the latest information that had been published in mass-market magazines and medical journals. She might be scared to death, but she would be the best-informed mother-to-be in Georgia.<sup>182</sup>

Even though her pregnancy poses immediate repercussions to her cherished career and the ways she can safely navigate such a crime-ridden, dangerous beat, Roberts resigns herself to making the best of the situation. Preparing for pregnancy through research and a bit of type A personality, Roberts realizes that to her amazement, “she was no longer fearful of becoming a parent, something that had terrified her only a few weeks earlier.”<sup>183</sup> While the readers are introduced to Roberts’s daughter, Martha Elisa Donelli, at the very end of the last novel, they never get to see her navigate her personal and professional duties as mother and reporter. Readers must take Roberts’s word that her

career will *not* take a backseat to her newborn. She says, “Okay, here’s the deal. I am not going to stop asking questions. I am not going to quit my job. I’m not going to take an early maternity leave...That’s final.”<sup>184</sup>

The rejection of marriage and maternity found in these novels signifies a change in mentality set into motion by the Second Wave feminist movement. Refusing to sacrifice themselves or their beloved careers for what is *expected* of them, Roberts and Adams take a post-feminist stance by choosing to do what is right for them even though it places them at odds with hegemonic standards of femininity. When Roberts discovers she is pregnant, her first reaction is fear and regret, not uncommon among women who find their pregnancies ill timed. Debunking the myth that you must choose *either* a career *or* motherhood, Woods uses Roberts’s character to show readers what it is like to have to work hard to gain that maternal instinct (in this case, a lot of research and a day or two in the library). Marital and maternal instincts, actions, and feelings do not simply fall into place for Roberts upon marriage; instead, she must make reasonable sacrifices to balance her two loves—journalism and her life with Donelli.

Lastly, these two women represent the paradox female reporters must become in order to take an active role in both private and public spheres. They become vulnerable to the men in their lives and offer themselves as a sacrifice for intimacy and anonymity, a status they cannot achieve through their career. While on the job, they distance themselves from romance, which they see as a distraction or threat to their success in journalism. To navigate between these two worlds is a difficult task and a personal choice.

## Chapter Six Endnotes

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<sup>175</sup> Woods, *Body and Soul*, 1989. p. 11

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 23-24

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p. 196

<sup>179</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars*, 1989. p. 33

<sup>180</sup> Shankman, *She Walks in Beauty*, 1991. p. 4

<sup>181</sup> Woods, *White Lightning* 1995. p. 97

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* p. 120

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* p. 208

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225

## Chapter Seven: Impossible Women in an Impossible South

*Perception of the reality of both the past and the present is greatly determined for most people by the myths which become part of their lives.*

—Paul Gaston, *The New South Creed*

The novels' Atlanta setting offers a site for intertextual comparison as well as for problematizing the gendered and racial outcomes that come with using the Deep South as the backdrop for the characters' journalistic escapades. Although rich in a long history of racism and sexism, Atlanta, and its surrounding areas, has also been assembled from the mythologies of the Old South and the New South, and these mythologies construct the worlds through which the main characters must traverse.

The Old South “has been one of the most powerful and enduring of American myths” because “it offer[s] an explanatory rationale to maintain the collective ego” whose lifeblood flowed through slavery, white (male) supremacy, and the glorification of white womanhood.<sup>185</sup> Authors like Margaret Mitchell<sup>186</sup> helped transform the fictional setting of *Gone With the Wind* into a valid perception, revealing the alleged truths of Southern life:

Increasingly, he [the Southerner] came to visualize the old regime as a society dominated by a beneficent plantation tradition, sustained by a unique code of honor, and peopled by happy, amusing slaves at one of the social spectrum and beautiful maidens and chivalric gentlemen at the other end—with little in between.<sup>187</sup>

But as Northern abolitionists began to threaten the morality of slavery and the plantation system, the leaders of the New South attempted to reconfigure the South's image as an industrial force. As a result, spokesmen like Henry Grady—who was the managing editor

of the *Atlanta Constitution* during this time—“used his office and influence to promote a New South program of northern investment, southern industrial growth, diversified farming, and white supremacy.”<sup>188</sup> Men like Grady,

expressed reverence for the civilization that had existed in the South, but conceded that it had passed irrevocably into history, had become an ‘Old South’ that must now be superseded by a new order. In time, the words ‘New South’ became the symbol that expressed this passage from one kind of civilization to another.<sup>189</sup>

Indeed, the New South did signify the rise of a new civilization that, despite its new dreams and rhetoric of change, continued to thrive off white supremacy (in the form of Jim Crow) and chauvinism disguised with manners. Both the Old South and New South became, in time, “genuine social myths with a controlling power over the way in which their believers perceived reality.”<sup>190</sup> With New South ideals in full force,<sup>191</sup> Southerners perpetuated mythology to “perform something closely akin to the function of religion—to unify experience.”<sup>192</sup>

The irony behind the works of Woods and Shankman inserts itself as a break between the realities and fantasies of the New South mythology. In the novels, Adams and Roberts navigate between the New South (the cities where their newsrooms are located) and the Old South (the small towns outside the city where they travel to interview their sources and solve crime). In their newsrooms, products of the New South, Adams and Roberts are white women who have risen to the top of a competitive journalism market. They possess power, money, and positioning within society at large. They are Third Wave feminists who are empowered through their body and refusals of marriage and motherhood (until they finally give in). Yet, when they travel to the outskirts of the city, Adams and Roberts are seen as unruly and out of line. Their higher

education and extensive resumes offer an untraditional image of Southern womanhood that threatens the men they encounter and, as a result, their lives. The Old South that both Adams and Roberts experience while reporting shows an absence of strong women like themselves and also makes people of color invisible—the very group that the foundation of the Old South was built upon. These portrayals facilitate convenient erasures of hegemonic power structures—structures that would, in fact, disallow the very existence of women like Adams and Roberts—and eliminate nonwhite characters from a racialized landscape. In this chapter, these invisibilities will be put into conversation with ideas about how the progressive byproduct of the New South’s existence has, indeed, created a color-blind racism that is evident in the lives of Adams and Roberts and also creates a racial structure that reinforces white privilege.

### ***Resisting Southern Mythologies of Womanhood***

Adams and Roberts latch onto the progressive mentality they have acquired in both their schooling and their work in large journalism markets like New York (Roberts) and California (Adams). Roberts, who is not originally from the South, resists the Southern belle mythology at every opportunity. She fears one day “[waking] up a bona fide Southerner,” which would “break her Yankee heart.”<sup>193</sup> Most novels mention Roberts’s desire to flee northward and take a position of prominence at a big-city paper. She does not want to establish a career in the South, which, for Roberts, would feel like settling for something less than her abilities. Yet, in the end, it is love that keeps her in Georgia and makes her content with life in the Deep South. Adams, on the other hand, was born to parents who were influential in Atlanta’s high society. Despite her roots in Atlanta, however, Shankman makes it clear from very early on that Adams is a

progressive woman who declines her debutante ball, refuses admission to the Junior League, and does not pick up her “membership in the other societies to which her accident of birth entitled her.”<sup>194</sup> Although she has been raised to be “a Southern lady, to be polite,”<sup>195</sup> Adams bucks traditional stereotypes of Southern womanhood, especially the notion that women should be meek and mild. In a conversation with her uncle George, Adams expresses her disinterest in hiding her opinions:

Have you ever listened to the way Southern women talk?... Ending every sentence like a question because they don’t even feel they have the right to make a declarative statement. Wouldn’t say shit if they had a mouthful of it...they *know* their husbands are running around on them, they *know* their children are doing drugs, they just keep on pouring tea and baking cookies and smiling. Dressing in fresh lacy underwear and smiling.<sup>196</sup>

Here, Adams evokes Old South notions of womanhood and pits herself starkly against them. Adams recognizes that one of the reasons she left Atlanta is because women need a “passport” to society’s upper crust,<sup>197</sup> a passport she was born with but disregarded out of principle. She also makes it clear that she does not fit into the role of the unassuming, self-degrading, lace-wearing, tea pouring “lady.” Later, however, Adams realizes that the South runs through her blood, no matter how strong her previous disavowals. Shankman writes,

No matter that Sam had chosen to skip her debut in Atlanta, that she had lived for many years in California, or that she had a liberal education and an even more leftish turn of mind. Once a belle, always a belle with those Deep South sensibilities—even if they were well-hidden most of the time.<sup>198</sup>

Perhaps the “sensibilities” Adams refers to here are not as textually well hidden as she (and Shankman) suggest. Adams and Roberts, who both claim to be progressive, forward-thinking women, live self-segregated lives in a racially diverse New South. These contradictions between beliefs and actions are questioned in the following section.

### ***Building Impossible: Color-Blind Racism in a Raceless South***

As evidenced in both Woods's and Shankman's novels, Old South racist sensibilities are ever-present, even if invisible to the main characters and their immediate relationships. In Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's book *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, he posits a color-blind racist ideology "which acquired cohesiveness and dominance in the late 1960s" and that "explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics."<sup>199</sup> As Bonilla-Silva writes, there is a "contradiction between whites claiming to be color blind and their almost totally white pattern of social interaction."<sup>200</sup> In these novels, color-blind racism is housed in the bodies of "progressive" female journalists who travel through impossibly raceless Old and New Souths and also exists in the authors' rendering of people of color invisible. Not a single nonwhite character is given prominence in either the characters' workplace or personal lives. This utter absence of diversity validates the presence of Bonilla-Silva's color-blind race theory in both series.

From a close textual analysis, readers can find problems in the claim that the characters are liberal in a post-racial Southern city. Indeed, there is much evidence that remnants of the Old South still linger in the city's resistance to change. For example, Shankman makes repeated references to the South's opposition to both large and small-scale changes in mentality despite the large shift in demographic. She writes,

[T]he Varsity still made chili dogs. Manners still counted. And the television preachers still had an audience, as did the fulminating racists—in a town that was now sixty percent black and well into its second black mayor. Ah, Atlanta.<sup>201</sup>

In a large city largely comprised of African-Americans, it is shocking to see that no one in Adams's inner circle, none of her colleagues, and not one of her interview subjects is a person of color. The only African-American Adams encounters is an out-of-town friend of her boyfriend, an associate rather someone with whom she has a personal friendship or relationship. Nonetheless, Adams still considers herself extremely liberal. The same is true for Roberts, who never interacts with any person of minority status—black, Latino, Asian, gay, etc. The characters' self-pronounced "progressive" mentality can be interrogated using color-blind race theory in order to query why race is minimized in these novels. Bonilla-Silva writes,

[W]hites, despite their professed color blindness, live in white neighborhoods, associate primarily with whites, befriend mostly whites, and choose whites as their mates. The contradiction between their professed life philosophy and their real practice in life is not perceived by whites as such because they do not interpret their hypersegregation and isolation from minorities (in particular blacks) as a *racial* outcome.<sup>202</sup>

Rather than being a racial outcome, as Bonilla-Silva notes, whites see self-segregation as "natural" or biological, as a process of choice and preference rather than actions with racist meaning behind them. Roberts admits that as a girl "Growing up in a well-educated, politically liberal family that was virtually blind to racial and ethnic distinctions, she's never understood the deep-seated biases that moved others to hatred and random violence, often directed toward individuals whom they'd never met in person."<sup>203</sup> But she enacts a certain nonviolent violence on the people of color she encounters by not actively engaging with them; and Woods and Shankman do minorities an active disservice by excluding them from novels where they should be present in large numbers. This complete lack of minority presence slowly begins to pull apart the authors'

constructions of Adams and Roberts as progressive women and, instead, replaces them with perpetuations of sanitized white hegemony.

In both series, Woods and Shankman create characters imbued with a political agency that is marked by a disavowal of wealth and social privilege and the claim of being “urban.” But, these renunciations reinscribe black invisibility and claims that these women’s privilege is simply an “accident of birth” rather than an achieved lifestyle through self-segregation. Woods and Shankman compile images that form a utopian construction of the world, a place where “color” does not exist. This social imaginary, however, privileges whiteness and reinforces a racist social structure not too far departed from Old South ideologies. Perhaps the Old South mythology still lives on in these novels because “The idea of the South—a particular idea of the South—has been a potent image for both Southerners and non-Southerners, and it has been difficult to overcome, even by those who made an effort to do so.”<sup>204</sup> In the authors’ attempts to present readers with women who are able to rise to power in the New South while conquering Old South ideologies, they implicitly code color-blind racism into their texts. The Southern belle mythology is championed at the expense of diversity. If novels such as these are to be symbols of progress, “whiteness must be challenged wherever it exists.”<sup>205</sup>

## Chapter Seven Endnotes

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<sup>185</sup> Smith, 1985. p. 18

<sup>186</sup> “Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* was written to provide a new interpretation of Southern culture from a somewhat irreverent Southern journalist.” Ibid. p. 44

<sup>187</sup> Gaston, 1970. p. 28

<sup>188</sup> <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2451>

<sup>189</sup> Gaston, 1970. pp. 25-26

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. p. 28

<sup>191</sup> The discourse of a “New South” was introduced by Henry Grady, who was “invited to speak at the 1886 meeting of the New England Society in New York City.”  
<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2451>

<sup>192</sup> Gaston, 1970. p. 29

<sup>193</sup> Woods, *Deadly Obsession*, 1995. p. 112

<sup>194</sup> Shankman, *Now Let's Talk of Graves*, 1990. p. 45

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. p. 80

<sup>196</sup> Shankman, *Then Hang All the Liars*, 1989. p. 178

<sup>197</sup> Shankman, *Now Let's Talk of Graves*, 1990. p. 56

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. p. 15

<sup>199</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 2003. p. 2

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. p. 179

<sup>201</sup> Shankman, *Now Let's Talk of Graves*, 1990. pp. 30-31

<sup>202</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 2003. p. 179

<sup>203</sup> Woods, *Ties That Bind*, 1991. p. 147

<sup>204</sup> Smith, 1985. p. 44

<sup>205</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 2003. p. 184

## Conclusion

*Feminism was made possible by the silent seepage of images of public life into the private, a process that began with the growth of literacy and mass culture. Feminist politics have always been intimately concerned with connecting up these worlds.*

—Catharine Lumby, *Bad Girls: The media, sex & feminism in the 90s*

The previous chapters are a compilation of positive and negative images of the female journalist in fiction. At times, these images fall into cultural stereotypes and, at others, buck traditional norms of femininity and strive to use Roberts and Adams to redefine the image of the modern, working journalist. Falling in and out of the sob sister, stunt reporter, victim, and “one of the boys” stereotypes, these women exemplify the ways that

Gender is consequently ‘constructed’ in relation to a particular place and time and more importantly in relation to the existing power relations of the culture in question, as well as the gendered experiences one has over one’s lifetime.<sup>206</sup>

Despite their time, place, past experiences, and gender, both Adams and Roberts enter the field of journalism for the same reasons as their male counterparts: “because, at bottom, it [is] considered a noble and influential profession.”<sup>207</sup> Their motivations behind writing stories are never doubted. They never ask for their celebrity status; rather, it befalls them as a result of their meaningful articles and unusual rise to the top of a male-dominated field. As reporters, they are relentless, committed, considerate, and truth-seeking no matter the cost. Yet, like their real-life counterparts, Adams and Roberts struggle to be taken seriously as professional journalists<sup>208</sup> and battle to keep their personal and professional lives in balance.

Though these characters only exist in fiction, their journalistic work within each series of novels has an influence on real-world perceptions of female reporters. The mere

existence of fictional novels starring female reporters as their protagonists demonstrates the progress achieved by the women's movement over the past few decades. Fully removed from the responsibilities and obligations to the private sphere, Adams and Roberts become prominent members of public discourse and, through this departure, develop a space for real women to think about themselves within the context of the media world. In these novels, women can be reporters (or celebrities), mothers (or motherhood's antithesis), wives (or singles), girlfriends (or lovers), and uncommitted to men (but not their work) in a space and time that refused these roles before. For these reasons, the image of the female journalist in the fiction of Woods and Shankman establishes and builds upon new understandings of womanhood in the real media world while establishing that a change has undeniably taken place.

Despite taking a major step toward a fuller definition of womanhood, Woods and Shankman diminish the capacity for *total* change by subjecting their characters to old, harmful stereotypes and by constructing a raceless South as the backdrop for these women's lives. There is still great emphasis placed on the characters' bodies, their romantic relationships with men, and their sexuality, thereby re-creating long-standing oppressions. The setting serves as a constant trap, reminding the characters of their daily transgressions of the category "woman." Vacillating between the Old South and New South, Roberts and Adams must be two women at once in order to survive the expectations of each world—traditional and decorous in one, freethinking and self-sufficient in the other. However, they never have to be conscious of race, and these whitewashed novels set the stage for hegemony to resurface and present itself as a "progressive" post-race Atlanta—an impossibility.

Both women experience a double reading on their bodies—that of their fellow characters in the novel and that of the reader. In essence, these women become both the subject of the reader’s attention and an actor in the fictional world they populate.<sup>209</sup> There is invested meaning onto “the female body as a source of both the real and the unreal, authenticity and artifice...even as they [acknowledge] the disturbing ways in which mass-market consumerism and media technologies [are] redefining those bodies.”<sup>210</sup>

Found at a difficult crossroads of representation, Adams and Roberts join the ranks of “Women journalists [who] face the problem they have always faced: how to avoid collaboration in the promotion of an ideology that is not useful to the readers they serve.”<sup>211</sup> Among the most detrimental images are the inauthentic portrayals of women’s power within the newsroom. Adams and Roberts possess the complete freedom to pick their own beats (even if it means disobeying their editors’ directions), choose the hours they work (which means rarely spending time in the newsroom), skipping the workplace chain of command (which comes at the expense of making friends), and, in the process, achieving great success, salary, and notoriety within the profession and community (which, at its heart, is very unrealistic). These unrealistic depictions of these women’s power and position within the newsroom, and the subject matters they write about, ignore journalism’s history of burying women in the “women’s pages.” In real newsrooms across the country during the 1960s and 1970s, there existed “distinctive male and female ghettos of employment” that discouraged women from entering “the hard news arena or from progressing within it, through lack of promotion prospects for women.”<sup>212</sup> And while women in the 1980s and 1990s were still striving to overcome these barriers, this reality does not exist in the novels. The characters experience little adversity in their rise

to the top, and their positions of power bear little resemblance to the real world. The likelihood of a female journalist exerting full autonomy over her career and skipping the newsroom hierarchy altogether is, aside from the depiction of a raceless South, another impossibility.

What can be learned from these portraits of female journalists is complicated. The fictional female reporter is “A peculiar balance of vulnerability and courage...If the reporter-heroine is often laughed at, she is also memorable and powerful. Self-sufficient and fun-loving, she offers an appealing blend of sentimental realism; she is modern without being *too* modern.”<sup>213</sup> Indeed, what exists within her most is a paradox, a site of the collision between old values and new expectations. Men see within her a compilation of masculine qualities—determination, curiosity, aggressive reporting, success and frequent publication on hard news beats—housed in a quintessential feminine form. Unsurprisingly, it is the characters’ “male characteristics that allow them success within the male profession [that] often deny them happiness as a woman”<sup>214</sup> on a personal or professional level.

Perhaps fiction beyond the twentieth century will continue to explore the images and representations of female journalists found in popular novels and begin to fill in the gaps between fiction and the expectations of a much harsher real world. The truth behind these fictional images lies in the reality from which these images are created, circulated, and accepted among real women in real working environments. As employment barriers slowly break down and more women rise to positions of power within the media industry, perhaps they will have the authority to “prevent stereotyping, foster new thinking about definitions of newsworthiness, and ensure balance in coverage—in terms of issues

covered and points of view included.”<sup>215</sup> Until women are able to reach such a critical mass, the reporter-heroines created by Woods and Shankman “may have smoothed the way by making it easier for readers to imagine women writing in the public sphere.”<sup>216</sup>

Overall, the novels show readers what women must give up to be successful, what types of happiness must be sacrificed, and, by default, which types of women would be *excluded* from the version of journalism depicted by the authors. Adams and Roberts are exemplary women with impressive educational backgrounds, aggressive reporting styles, and a tireless presence in the newsroom. If readers gain nothing else from a close appraisal, it is the notion that journalism is still an elite profession, filled exclusively with overachieving women who, at the end of the day, can still have it all and be at all, despite their resistance.

To say that Adams and Roberts are merely *images* of real female reporters is to undermine the power and authority an image can possess in both its production and consumption. As readers in a consumerist culture, “We consume images. And images are what the media is made of.”<sup>217</sup> In the process of watching news programming, reading a newspaper or magazine, or even picking up a paperback novel, “All of us have learnt to consume ourselves.”<sup>218</sup> Within the images are pieces of *real* women and *real* journalists whose existence has been interwoven into fictional accounts like those of Woods and Shankman. Both the authors and their readers are implicated in the future of these images—in their re-creation, their successes and failures in popular culture, and their impact on women’s views of the profession of journalism and their place within it.

## Conclusion Endnotes

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<sup>206</sup> Robinson 2005. p. 9

<sup>207</sup> Bradley and Collins 2005. p. 267

<sup>208</sup> “Over history, then, women have struggled to be taken seriously as professional journalists.” Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 232

<sup>209</sup> “[T]he representation of women in news and other fact-based media presents a complex and mixed picture of women as subjects and actors in society.” Byerly and Ross 2006.. p. 37

<sup>210</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 120

<sup>211</sup> Bradley and Collins 2005. p. 263

<sup>212</sup> Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004. p. 92

<sup>213</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 103

<sup>214</sup> Born 1981. p. 10

<sup>215</sup> Beasley & Gibbons, 1993. p. 267

<sup>216</sup> Lutes 2006. p. 118

<sup>217</sup> Lumby 1997. p. 79

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. p. 81

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## Appendix A: Novel Summaries

### *Bank On It* (1993) By Sherryl Woods

When investigative reporter Amanda Roberts gets a call from an anonymous source asking her to meet him in a cemetery at midnight, she did not know she'd end up in the midst of a matter of national security. When her mysterious source is killed before her very eyes, Roberts is hot on the trail to try and find the murderer and his motivations. When tips lead her to an Atlanta bank brokering illegal high-stakes arms deals to the Middle East, Roberts is faced with a dilemma—run her story on the front page of the next issue of *Inside Atlanta* and risk a U.S. military operation abroad or hold the story and comply with law enforcement for the first time in her career.

### *Body and Soul* (1989) By Sherryl Woods

When a beloved aerobics instructor is killed at a popular workout club, Weights and Measures, Amanda Roberts is already on the scene working on a story about rise of singles' memberships. The murder brings up a lot of unanswered questions about the club and its ownership. The deeper Roberts and her partner Joe Donelli dig, the more complicated the crime becomes. After an undercover drug operation, threatening phone calls, and a few attempts on her own life, Roberts discovers that the illegal activities at the club are a cover up for a more prestigious local institution. In the end, Roberts not only comes out alive but with a hot story for *Inside Atlanta* magazine's center spread.

### *Deadly Obsession* (1995) By Sherryl Woods

When Hamilton Kenilworth, a high-society Atlanta lawyer, finds that his wife has disappeared with his 7-year-old daughter, he marches down to *Inside Atlanta* and implores Amanda Robert's help. Promising a first-rate front-page story, Kenilworth gives Roberts access to one of the city's most guarded families—and the secrets of their troubled marriage. Discovering a web of affairs, lies, jealousy, and betrayal, Roberts finally tracks down Mrs. Kenilworth who has run away to South Carolina, only to find out she has been murdered. With her persistent investigations, Roberts finally uncovers the cause of Mrs. Kenilworth's death—a twist that no one, not even Roberts herself, expected.

### *First Kill All the Lawyers* (1988) By Sarah Shankman

In the first novel of the series, Samantha Adams returns to her hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, with a pocketful of journalistic awards and an impressive stack of clips she earned while a reporter at the San Francisco *Chronicle*. Accepting a new job at the *Journal-Constitution*, Sam gets straight to investigating after a distinguished attorney is found dead in a ravine. Sam finds herself in the midst of a complicated cover-up where “good ole’ boys” go to any lengths to protect their land investments and lucrative drug deals—including setting up the honest lawyer and costing him his life. When Sam finds herself abducted by the corrupt sheriff, she sacrifices her life to get the story. With hard-hitting reporting and some luck, Sam gets her story on page one and restores justice to Atlanta's high society.

*Hide and Seek* (1993) By Sherryl Woods

When reporter Amanda Roberts takes up jogging in an effort to get physically fit she does not realize that she is placing herself in the path of a psychopathic serial killer. When a beautiful marathon runner is killed just moments after stopping to talk to her on a jogging trail, Roberts knows that she cannot rest until she finds the woman's murderer. The closer Roberts comes to solving the crime, the closer she gets to her own death. Receiving multiple death threats, Roberts continues on with the story despite protests from her editor and fiancé Joe Donelli. When Roberts finds herself face-to-face with the man Donelli hired to protect her, she realizes that her soon-to-be husband unknowingly placed her face-to-face with the murderer. Roberts manages to escape (with the help of her foster son Pete) with her life and another great story for *Inside Atlanta* magazine.

*Now Let's Talk of Graves* (1990) By Sarah Shankman

Samantha Adams finds herself covering a murder while visiting her friend Kitty Lee at Louisiana's Mardi Gras festivities. When Church Lee, Kitty's brother and the father of the debutante and drug-dealer Zoe, is hit by a car and killed by a masked driver, Sam starts searching for answers explaining his untimely death. Harry Zack, a local insurance investigator, is also sent to investigate the case. When Harry and Sam cross paths, they trade more than insults. Eventually, they help each other discover the twist to an already twisted murder: the wealthy Church Lee set up his daughter's drug dealer, the son of his girlfriend, to kill him so his daughter could collect on his insurance. By the end of the novel, Sam not only has one more investigative story under her belt, but she also has a new love: Harry Zack.

*Reckless* (1989) By Sherryl Woods

The first in a series of novels, *Reckless* describes Amanda Roberts, a well-educated female reporter who sacrifices her prominent career in New York to move to a rural Georgia town in order to support her husband's new professorship at the University of Georgia. When he cheats on her with one of his students, Amanda finds herself divorced, alone, and working for a small weekly under Editor Oscar Cates. After being sent out to cover a cooking demonstration by famous Chef Maurice, Amanda finds herself in the midst of a murder and an investigative story. Her only obstacle to solving the case and getting a great story is former Detective Joe Donelli. Even though Amanda always stays one step ahead of Donelli, she cannot seem to shake him. By the end of the novel, Roberts and Donelli are working side-by-side to solve the case of Chef Maurice's death. Amanda's hard work gets her an offer at a new magazine called *Inside Atlanta*, which she accepts in the waning moments of the novel.

*She Walks In Beauty* (1991) By Sarah Shankman

Samantha Adams managing editor Hoke Toliver has once again sent her as far from hard news as you can get—the Miss America Pageant. But while in Atlantic City, Adams notices that one of the obnoxious pageant judges, Kurt Roberts, has suddenly gone missing and she wants to get to the bottom of his disappearance. While filing her “soft” news stories about the contestants every day, Adams also makes calls and scours Atlantic City for anyone who might know of Roberts's whereabouts. In the process of solving the mystery, Adams finds herself in the middle of Miss America drama—a stolen

dress, two missing hotel employees, kidnapping, murder, religious protestors, and a friendly wager with her boyfriend, Harry, about who will find Roberts first. The novel ends with the mystery solved, a hard news story for Adams, and her resignation from the *Constitution*.

*Stolen Moments* (1990) By Sherryl Woods

In the second novel in the Amanda Roberts series a thief wreaks havoc on Atlanta's high society and its collection of pricey Civil War antiques. *Inside Atlanta's* star reporter, Amanda, is commissioned by Miss Martha Wellington, one of the wealthiest and most prestigious of Atlanta's citizens, to help solve the crime and return her stolen property. But, when Roberts ex-husband and Civil War memorabilia expert, Mack, makes his way into Amanda's life again, she must choose between the two men in her life—Mack, the man she once loved, and Donelli, the man who slowly but surely snuck into her heart. Putting her life on the line, Amanda does almost anything to solve the crime, return the stolen property, and ease the minds of Miss Martha—all without hardly ever stepping foot into the newsroom. In the end, Donelli proves that he'll fight (and even wait) for Amanda, and the two end the novel by talking of marriage.

*Ties That Bind* (1991) By Sherryl Woods

After months of persuasion Joe Donelli has finally convinced reporter Amanda Roberts to marry him. But when Roberts finds herself alone at the altar and Donelli's old Chevy blown to pieces by a car bomb, she knows that she is in for a good story. Roberts finds herself hot on the trail of a small-town conspiracy to cover up KKK and skinhead activity in the government. With her fiancé Donelli still missing, Roberts forms a unique bond with an FBI agent who also has interest in the case. Together, they manage to untangle a web of hatred and racism that leaves Roberts dodging death threats. After being reunited with Donelli at the end of the novel, Roberts is ready to write a convincing story that will land this deep-South mayor behind bars.

*Then Hang All the Liars* (1989) By Sarah Shankman

Samantha Adams of the *Journal-Constitution* finds herself investigating the beau of an old family friend after rumors emerge that the women in his past have mysteriously died. In order to prevent the death of her friend, Sam begins digging up Mr. Randolph Percy's past in an effort to save her friend's life and make the front page. A poisoned puppy and a savaged doll end up in murder, and Sam finds herself in the middle of it all. Fighting back an attacker who tries to choke and poison her to death, Sam comes out alive and with a story in-hand.

*Wages of Sin* (1994) By Sherryl Woods

When a beloved receptionist for Georgia's Senator Blaine Rawlings is found dead, her car rammed headfirst into a tree off the highway, the police rule it a suicide. But Amanda Roberts is not so sure. Why would a woman commit suicide only days after putting a down payment on her dream wedding dress? Traveling to and from the Capitol, Roberts discovers that the receptionist, Mary Alice Walker, was on the verge of accusing Rawlings of sexual harassment thereby ruining his political career. But that was just the beginning. Roberts soon uncovers a love triangle of politics and love that not only

threatens to ruin Rawlings's political career, but the lives of others close to him. When a hit-and-run outside the Capitol leads to an unlikely arrest, Roberts manages to not only get her exclusive story for *Inside Atlanta*, but she also gives Walker's family peace of mind and redeems the careers of a few politicians as well.

*White Lightning* (1995) By Sherryl Woods

The last novel in the Amanda Roberts series tells the story of Miss Martha Wellington, an 86-year-old woman of Georgia's high society, who commissions Amanda to link a crime committed 52 years ago by her long, lost lover (who was wrongfully accused), to a recent murder, and solve them both. The only catch? Miss Martha has been told by doctors that she has only a little longer to live, which puts Amanda on a fast deadline. When she finds out she is pregnant with her husband, and former Brooklyn cop's baby, she has to fight morning sickness, the new assignment editor in her newsroom at *Inside Atlanta* magazine, and the men who are protecting a business that has been in the family for generations: making moonshine. In the end, Roberts solves the two crimes by getting a murderous confession, putting the other suspects in jail, and providing closure for Miss Martha. The novel ends with the birth of Roberts's baby—Martha Elisa Donelli.