



LOOKING FOR CLUES:

WRITERS INVESTIGATE GENDER DISPARITY IN CRIME FICTION

For Immediate Release:

(CHICAGO – July 2006) -- Women write almost half of all crime fiction, but is their fair share of review space buried in the back garden? Sisters in Crime (SinC), a worldwide, not-for-profit organization that provides networking, advice and support to female mystery writers and their fans, wants that question answered.

To help solve the mystery, SinC conducts a quarterly monitoring project to track the number of reviews received by male and female authors. In the first quarter of 2006, their research revealed that men wrote two out of three books reviewed in the 15 top metropolitan literary sections.

“Reviews can drive sales. Therefore, if women authors are not reviewed as often as men, their books may not sell and the possibility of being published again is less likely. This does a disservice to readers because it narrows the available selections,” says Libby Fischer Hellmann, president of SinC and author of several mystery novels.

Exactly why women authors are reviewed less frequently can stem from several factors. According to Hellmann, reviewers often do not choose which books they cover. Rather, editors or newspaper publishers dictate which titles will be reviewed. Those selections may be based on books written by authors who frequently appear on best-seller lists.

Another area of concern is that of the paperback original (PBO), a format that seems to be dominated by women writers. Unfortunately, national and major market publications rarely review PBOs, adding an additional obstacle to many female authors of crime fiction.

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“Whatever the reason, a cycle is created that is difficult to break. Reviews sell books. The more they sell, the more that author is reviewed,” says Hellmann.

To track progress – or lack thereof – SinC monitors more than 60 publications, from dailies to quarterly review magazines, including the *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Denver Post*, *Indianapolis Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Mystery News*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*. The results from 2006 show some progress toward achieving gender parity in book reviews.

“While we are encouraged by some of the results, we still need to expose more readers to the works of female crime fiction writers,” said Hellmann.

Notable findings for the first quarter of 2006 for crime fiction books and authors were:

- In first quarter 2005, 56 percent of all mystery books reviewed were by male authors. Early 2006 results show that ratio had dropped to 53 percent male versus 47 percent female.
- Crime fiction reviews in general have declined significantly. There were 1,050 crime fiction books reviewed in the first quarter of 2005, compared to 574 books in the same period in 2006.
- A few book industry trade publications, such as *Mystery News*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal* and *Kirkus* review books by men and women almost equally.
- Some publications have shown significant improvement in reviews of crime fiction books by women. These include the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which increased its reviews of women writers by 42 percent, although reviews of mystery books overall declined significantly. In the *Boston Globe*, the ratio of male versus female author reviews improved from 70/30 to 60/40.
- The *Indianapolis Star* showed the greatest change. In first quarter 2005, all the mystery reviews were of male-authored books. During the same period in 2006, books written by male and female authors received an equal number of reviews.

Other publications showing noted improvements were the *Los Angeles Times*, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, the *Winston-Salem Journal* and the *Dallas Morning News*.

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Though much has been gained in their 20 years of striving for parity, the monitoring project shows there is still work to be done. Full results of the 2006 first quarter monitoring project are available at www.sistersincrime.org.

SinC was founded by a group of mystery writers in 1986 to overcome the inequities faced by female authors. About one third of SinC members are published authors, including best-selling novelists Sara Paretsky, Mary Higgins Clark, Tess Gerritson and Hellmann, among others. The organization will kick off its 20th anniversary celebration in October, at the Boucheron Mystery Convention in Madison, Wisconsin.

Sisters in Crime's mission is to combat discrimination against women in the mystery field, educate publishers and the general public as to inequities in the treatment of female authors, raise the level of awareness of their contributions to the field and promote the professional advancement of women who write mysteries.

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