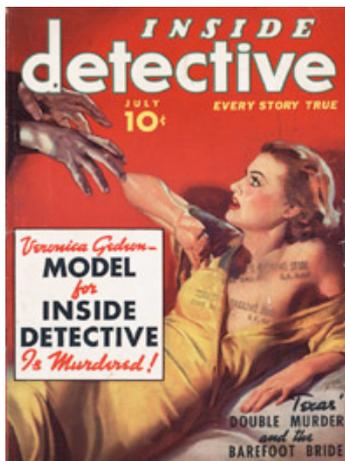


Lee Horsley

**Dead Dolls and Deadly Dames:
the Cover Girls of American True Crime Publishing**

“Even while the fingers of a sex-maniac were throttling the life out of her body, Veronica Gedeon’s picture appeared in the April issue of *Inside Detective* which could have been purchased at the newsstand a block from her home. For this illustration she posed in the semi-nude in an attitude of shame and humiliation.”

- *Inside Detective*, July 1937



The *Inside Detective* story reporting the murder of one of their own models, Veronica Gedeon, disturbingly captures the confusion of life and art that constitutes an important part of the appeal of true crime journalism. Before her death the girl posed for pictures used to illustrate an “eerily prophetic” first-person exposé of a vice ring, and the report of her own murder is illustrated

both with her “cringing and shame-stricken...last pose” and with a selection of other “fearful and violent poses” taken during her working life - a life which, the article implies, was as out of control as her semi-undress on the cover of their magazine would seem to indicate. The cover picture of this issue echoes the poses of the “real life” photographs – a self-protective gesture and an expression of fear, but also, in her half-open mouth and voluptuousness, an embodiment of alluring and destructive sexuality.

The fact that Veronica Gedeon was an *actual* victim as well as a “model victim”

fortuitously helps *Inside Detective* to heighten the kind of ambiguity on which it thrived, and which pulp-realist cover art was devoted to creating. The true crime magazine combines art work and photographs, in later decades moving towards the use of photographs *as* cover art, and confusion is compounded by the lush style of the articles themselves (“No flashing neon sign beckoned nocturnal adventurers to Eleanor Thompson’s honky-tonk. Like a rattlesnake’s den, it nested in darkness...”¹). Consistently blurring the distinction between fiction and reality, these magazines proclaim realism (in titles like *All True Fact Crime*) whilst at the same time offering readers the melodramatic heightening of action and the artistic intensification of erotic imagery. In its representation of women - whether they are victims or aggressors - true crime cover art aims for the frankly sensual, with seductively exposed flesh and provocative dishabille; it employs a vibrantly coloured, hyper-real style that has ‘the gut-level appeal of a tabloid flashgun photo, with headlines to match.’² In the dramatic heightening of gesture and expression, the artist almost invariably seeks to suggest that the woman depicted is a source both of arousal and danger, whether to herself or to any man involved with her. Our knowledge that there *is* a man involved is an integral part of the effect, although the man himself is generally present only by implication. In their first two or three decades (1930s-1950s), true crime covers reify the dangerous sexuality of the woman, but tend to represent the man, if at all, only synecdochically, perhaps as a sinister hand reaching into the picture from above, an ambiguous figure partially and less realistically drawn (the darkly Gothic hands reaching down to kill Veronica Gedeon; the huge red outline of a hand on the cover of *Detective Cases*, October 1956). The intruding male hands may seem to signify the

¹ *American Detective*, July 1936, p. 54.

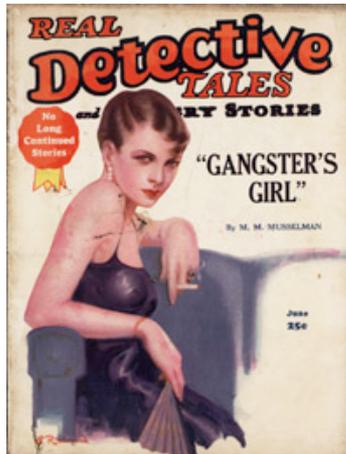
² Lee Server, *Over My Dead Body: The Sensational Age of the American Paperback: 1945-1955* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), pp. 61-2.

commodification of the woman (for example, the hand proffering jewelry on the cover of *Women in Crime*, July 1949) or may threaten to kill her (for example, the sinister hand about to drown a bound girl on the cover of *Real Detective*, July 1940): in either case, the man is largely left to the viewer's imagination. Or perhaps, more accurately, this male figure, in being outside the frame, is placed *alongside* the male voyeur who purchases the magazine, and both equally conceive of themselves as at the mercy of the voluptuous reality of the woman herself. These are magazines of guilty pleasure, both arousing in their audience and representing in their cover pictures desire for the hazardous attractions of the strongly sexual woman.

The pulp magazine covers hugely influenced the cover art of the paperback originals that began to be produced in their hundreds at the end of the 1940s, and like these mass market crime novels they repeatedly return to images of desire and excess, helping to establish in the popular imagination the often contradictory stereotyping of female victims and transgressors at a time when women's social and occupational roles were changing dramatically. The emasculating fear of women who were no longer confined to their traditional domestic functions, who seemed to threaten usurpation of male power, is repeatedly glimpsed in the images of deadly dames who seem all too seductive, and whose independence and resourcefulness have carried them beyond the conventional bounds of respectability.

From the 1930s on, one of the most powerful images of the woman out of control is the gangster's moll. Aggressive broads shooting .45s or even submachine guns, or stamping with spiked heels on a man's hand, stride on to the covers of true crime magazines like *Inside Detective*, *True Detective* and *Real Detective* and of their

fictional contemporaries like *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*. In both the “real” and fictional worlds portrayed, these are women characterised by a paradoxical combination of “masculine” and “feminine” traits - “potent” women, appropriating masculine powers, alternately threatening the male and arousing his desire. On the

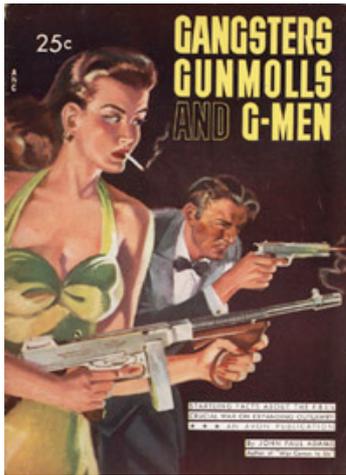


front of *Real Detective*, for example, in January 1930, the cover girl wears an expression that is calculating and predatory, her sleek beauty projecting both sexual sophistication and the indifference of a dominatrix; her breasts, like those of many a murderous woman in pulp fiction, are a feminine attribute that seem endowed with a male potential for violence and aggression - the sort of

contradiction embodied, for example, by Clara in Duke Linton’s *Crazy to Kill* (1950), with her “two ivory-hued mounds of feminine dynamite exposed...to an inch above the hard, detonating nipples” (24). As with representations of the American gangster himself, these are images that offer the viewer the double satisfaction of vicarious participation in gangland vice and of the moral disapproval of criminals popularly perceived as “the root of evil”, with the frisson of danger generally contained within a retributive frame. The image itself, however, seems indestructible, and the gangster’s moll, holding either a smoking gun or a smoking cigarette and more than a match for the men who try to take her on, is one of the most durable figures on the early true crime covers: a raven-haired beauty in a low-cut red dress holding a gun on the cover of *Real Detective*, for example, in January 1933; or her twin sister disposing of a smoking gun on the cover of *American Detective* in July 1936. The staying power of the stereotype is evident in her continued appearances on



the covers of the 1940s: *Gangsters Gunmolls and G-Men*, for example, in January 1949, depicts a gun moll with threatening bosoms, both gun and cigarette smoking, unquestionably the dominant figure on a cover where the male gangster is a crouching, inadequate-looking background figure whose tiny pistol is pathetic in comparison to the gun moll's massive machine gun. Like the gangster's moll Mabie



Otis in the 1949 novel *Miss Otis Throws a Come-Back*, this statuesque, confident woman projects a “an underlying suggestion of strength and cruelty...An experienced dame, you would say” (3).

Images of the violent women of gangland are obviously very closely related to - sometimes indistinguishable from - images of “ordinary” women who have gone to the bad. The *femme fatale*, the most familiar figure on the crime fiction covers of the 1950s, emerges in the pulp magazines at about the same time as does the gangster's moll and is repeated with countless minor variations, the immodest icon for a period during which sex increasingly became one of the major ingredients of mass market publishing. This is the decade that saw the beginning, both in film and pulp literature, of a great outpouring of femme fatale plots, in which an apparently “normal” woman turns out to be “unnaturally” sexual, aggressive, and ultimately death-dealing - Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* or Mrs Grayle in *Murder, My Sweet* (Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*). When she belongs outside the world of organised crime, the hard-bitten, capable woman, exceeding the structures of social control, is associated with more wide-spread degenerative forces at work in the whole of the society and culture. On the make, but not explicable as part of a criminal subculture, she exploits

her newly won freedoms in the social and economic spheres to subvert the established hierarchies in ways that are “inappropriate, deviant...and unlawful.”³ The elements of this image constitute a kind of visual shorthand for dangerous attraction and steamy corruption. Even more than the gangster’s moll, it is an image associated with an explicitly sexual iconography: this is a sexual predator drawing in men who suffer loss of control and destabilisation of identity.

On the covers of mid-century true crime magazines, the *femme fatale* appears in



countless guises, her dress and expression often suggesting a perverted innocence or ruined domesticity. So, for example, on the cover of *Leading Detective* in May 1947 we see a blonde, white-clad woman who might pass as angelic except for the fact that she wears, like the gun moll, a calculating expression and clutches a weapon - a bottle of poison in place of a smoking gun,

but presumably lethal for the smug older man whose self-satisfied air suggests insufficient awareness of the risk he is running. The men endangered, by implication, often provide financial inducements to female corruption, but the women themselves display an alarming capacity for being corrupted and expertly manipulate men’s desires in order to exert control over their would-be corruptors.

The *True Crime* issue of May 1949, for example, uses an explicit caption to reinforce the image of a woman who preys on men (‘My body is my Lure - Thrill Mad Playboys are my



³ Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 192-3.

Suckers!'), stuffing their money between her ample breasts; even where the image of the corrupting power of male wealth is there more strongly - as in *Women in Crime*, July 49 - the image of the woman herself is sufficiently slatternly to make it perfectly clear that when she says 'I had nothing to lose but my virtue', she indeed values that commodity little in comparison to the jewelry that a male hand holds out at the side of the picture.

As in film noir, the corruption of the *femme fatale* is dangerous to the woman herself as well as to her male victim. A *Special Detective* (September 1948) cover, for example, on which an obviously sinful woman displays her undergarments and her ample cleavage, frames the main picture by a warning and an additional picture: a dead woman sprawls as the "final clause" to a sentence that starts, "All her schemes, all her pretended passion, all the men she had loved and cheated... They all led the gorgeous two-timing Beauty to this..." Especially once her untrammelled sexuality has been equated with prostitution, the *femme fatale* seems likely to pay the ultimate penalty for her excessive desires, her sexuality and her deceptiveness.

It is a short step from such a narrative of "just deserts" to that most ambiguous and controversial of all true crime cover images, the female victim. The style of pulp cover art itself accentuates one of the most recurrent themes in the pulp fiction and true crime representation of the woman as victim: she was asking for it. True crime covers almost invariably stress the woman's sexual allure, and the combination of this with her victimisation implies that the woman has invited her fate by making herself too available: like the hapless Veronica Gedeon, female victims have flaunted themselves, tempting men to acts of violation and violence. The cover of the July

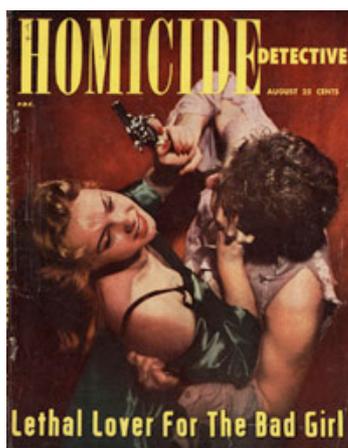
1940 issue of *Real Detective*, for example, which represents a bound girl about to be pushed under the water by a male hand, shows the (presumably doomed) girl in a pose as sensual as that of the standard “dangerous woman” cover, her semi-reclining



torso floating towards the viewer, her blonde curls spread out, her mouth open in what, under other circumstances, would be a sexually provocative expression. Countless other true crime covers manipulate this sort of sado-masochistic image:

America's Detective Annual (1944) portrays a bound woman, her scanty black negligee ripped, her pose and expression again a mixture of the helpless and the provocative; *Crime Detective*, April 1943, depicts a very phallic dagger protruding from a scarlet cushion, whilst the girl herself is caught in a pose somewhere between fright and submission.

The covers representing women as victims are those which change in the most problematic ways over the next few decades. From the 1950s on there is a tendency for the sadistic elements in these pictures to become more explicit. From very



stylised, fairly minimal indications of impending death, the covers move to a much more direct representation of the actual process of inflicting physical harm: so, for example, an early 1950s magazine, the *Homicide* issue of August 1951, depicts a highly sexualised struggle, as the ‘Lethal Lover for the Bad Girl’ grips an anguished-looking woman in a tense, violent encounter that is far

more visceral than the cover images of female victims in earlier decades; *Detective World*, May 1953, shows a bound woman with a male hand reaching into the picture,

but on this occasion to burn the woman with a smouldering cigarette; the *True Police Yearbook* (volume 1, 1953) presents another bound woman, far more disheveled than earlier female victims tended to be, and in an awkward enough posture to suggest that she really is a “tortured beauty on the murder rack” who “paid for the secret locked behind her lips”.

It is in covers of this sort that a confusion between life and (photographic) art began to raise serious questions in the public mind about the possible influence of such images on potential perpetrators of actual crimes. In the true crime magazines of the 1960s through the 1980s, the process of heightening the depiction of the sadistic torture of a female victim was carried much further, its disturbing impact increased by the use of photos rather than art work and by a growing tendency to bring the deviant male himself into the cover vignette. *Startling Detective*, in July 1965, for example, presents the standard earlier image of the bound woman whose charms are fairly fully displayed, but accompanies this by cover blurbs that focus attention on sexual sadism, which becomes one of the recurrent themes of these later covers (“Sex and the Sadist Criminal: the shocking documented study of the ecstasies that some human beings



find in the infliction of pain!”). *Best True Fact Detective*, March 1978, has a photograph of a girl held by a man who, though mostly out of frame, is a far more threatening presence than the disembodied hands of earlier covers: tightly bound, a hand covering her mouth, and a large pair of scissors about to descend on her, the

woman is posed next to the caption ‘Slaughter of the Virgin Coeds’ - the plural here suggesting a serial killer. The serial killer becomes, as in fiction and true crime

reporting generally, an increasingly familiar figure during this period. *Inside Detective*, in November 1974, for example, prints a photograph depicting a savage-looking man pursuing a clearly terrified woman up a stairway - a “Marine Peeping-Tom” who “cut her up just like he did those girlie photos”; *Front Page*, in July 1979, like many earlier covers, depicts a strangling, but here with a vicious male face just entering the picture from above, and a caption that draws the reader’s attention to acts of sadistic “overkill”, offering a catalogue of violations of the woman’s body: “strangled, beaten, shot and abused”. This turn towards the representation of the violence of the male sexual sadist introduces a kind of ambiguity far more troubling than those to be found in the earlier decades of true crime publishing. Sensationalized violence is combined with a marked eroticisation of the sufferings of the female victims. It was a trend that led ultimately to a movement away from the publication of female victim covers, after worries were voiced (for example, by the forensic pathologist Park Dietz) about the effects of the pornography of violence on any member of the male readership who, after looking at the true crime cover’s mixture of reality and fantasy, might be prompted to seek gratification “through actual, not fantasized, brutality.”⁴ By this time, however, the complete shift from artistic representation to photographic realism had also deprived true crime publishing of its most effective and memorable body of cover images.

⁴ Dale Keiger, "The Dark World of Park Dietz", <http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/1194web/dietz.html>