
Whodunit and Its Contemporary Reconfiguration in Rigby's *The Lost Girls of Penzance*

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Abstract

This research analyzes Sally Rigby's novel, *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023), through the framework of Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the *whodunit* to explore how the novel adheres to and diverges from traditional detective story conventions. Todorov's theory, outlined in his essay *The Typology of Detective Fiction* (1966), proposes a dual narrative structure characteristic of the *whodunit* genre firstly the "story of the crime", which occurs before the novel begins, and the "story of the investigation", which discloses as the plot progresses. Rigby's novel employs this structure effectively. The "Story of the Crime" involves the abduction of young girls and on the other hand murders which occurred almost two decades earlier, gradually revealed through flashbacks and the detective's discoveries, aligning with Todorov's description of the genre's structure. Secondly, Story of the Investigation, DI Pengelly is on leave but still manages to take over the investigation because of her ability and her dedication to serve her community and her professional commitment. There is also a diversity of plot elements and themes used by Rigby to make the story even more multifaceted and interesting. These include Clues and Red Herrings later on resolution. In addition, the novel introduces innovative elements, which are somehow antagonist to the conventions of the genre such as the story set in a small town, the atmospheric tension evoked by the rough coastline of Cornwall, and the exploration of themes like trauma, morality and how the past affects the present. The study concludes that while *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) conforms to the essentials of the genre of whodunit as specified by Todorov, it also broadens the boundaries of the genre through implementation of the contemporary themes and a unique setting. The current research will make a valuable contribution to the understanding of how the modern writers of crime fiction, such as Sally Rigby, are being innovative within the traditional genre structure, addressing the contemporary issues and literary tendencies. Further research could involve a comparative study of Rigby's work with other detective novels of the time to look at the evolution of the whodunit in the modern literature.

Keywords: Crime and Justice, Detective Fiction, Narrative Resolution, Red Herrings, Whodunit.

Introduction

Detective fiction has long held a unique place in the history of world literature, dazzling the readers with its structured puzzles, thrilling twists, and satisfying conclusions. Whether it is the logical deductions of Sherlock Holmes or the morally grey investigations of contemporary crime fiction, the genre has never

stood still. At the center of this evolution we find the narrative format of the whodunit, defined by theorist Tzvetan Todorov, who outlined its standard pattern: equilibrium, disruption (the crime), investigation and resolution. But in recent years, numerous modern works have started to push the boundaries of this setup, erasing the distinction between crime-solving and emotional narration.

Sally Rigby's *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023), the first installment in her *Cornwall Murder Mystery* series, represents an interesting case study in contemporary detective fiction. Whereas the novel adheres to the classical form of a whodunit as outlined in the works of Tzvetan Todorov that includes the crime itself, the use of the investigation and the disclosure simultaneously it enriches the storyline by imbuing it with emotional and psychological depths in character and story progression. Rigby's work exemplifies how modern crime narratives no longer are confined to the discovery of who the criminal is but also the emotional and moral consequences that reverberate in the life of the individuals involved.

The story starts with the abduction of young girls by a careful, unidentified serial perpetrator. The twists and turns found in suspense in the story all revolve around the work of Detective Inspector Lauren Pengelly whose holiday has just been interrupted after she finds out about human remains in the Trenowden Estate. As the story progresses, Rigby leads the reader through the various twists of the clues, false leads, and false trail (or red herrings), narrative strategies which give emphasis to Todorov in regard to the deductive treatment core of his classic detective fiction. The climax of the tension is the discovery of the identity of the criminal, which fits well in the resolution stage as described by Todorov, but does not erase the undercurrent of emotion, the damage of a psychological nature that indicates that order is not as fully restored as it should be.

The Lost Girls of Penzance (2023) is unique in its combination of the form-appropriateness and modern depth. Yet, having preserved the integrity of the whodunit format, the novel examines the internal lives of both the investigators and the suspects and illuminates the subject of trauma, guilt, justice, and motive. This emotional intensity is further enhanced by the brooding haze of the coastal towns of Cornwall in which the story is rooted within a locale that is both haunting and personal. The outcome is an utterly compelling combination of the classical detective novel with psychological thriller, the one that can be approached as encouraging not only the readers to be invested in the mystery as being a puzzle to be unlocked, but as a revelation of the state of humanity.

Literature review

Published in 2023 *The Lost Girls of Penzance* has not yet invited scholarly studies. Therefore the materials related to this novel remain limited to critical reviews and reader analyses. In a review of this novel the reader Diane S. (2023) commends the novel's emotional depth and sensitive portrayal of girl's disappearance, whereas Brenda (2023) compliments the dual plot structure and subtle characterization of detective Lauren Pengelly and detective Matt Price in this novel. According to a review by O'Shea (2023), there are minor weaknesses in dialogue but shows narrative's suspense and cohesion in the novel. Alongside this observation Jenny (2023) bring to the fore the innovative depiction of Cornwall's coastline that it is rough and Kate (2023) applauds rapid-paced narrative of the novel. At the same time Monika L. (2023) admires the psychological intensity and a coherent resolution of the novel. Collectively, *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) is classical whodunit structure and complex interplay of emotional realism as substantiate by these responses. Although dated as a modern novel, this novel still has most of the attributes of a classic detective story, making it an exciting study case of the development of the genre.

Theoretical Framework

The present paper closely reads detective fiction, through the lens of Tzvetan Todorov's *The Typology of Detective Fiction* (1966), which is one of the important works of structuralist literary analysis. According to him, the general structure of a detective story is composed of two plots: the crime and the investigation that

is interrelated. The whodunit, the most famous sub-genre, is about identifying the perpetrator. The events follow the detective solving the hints and red herrings and the ultimate discovery being the climax of the story. The work was subsequently published as an essay in Todorov's book, *The Poetics of Prose* (1977), published by Cornell University Press. Using the Todorov's framework, the study seeks to understand how the novel *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) fits or breaks these conventions. Rigby's work provides a new insight into the classical works of detective fiction, but it incorporates the aspects of both traditional and contemporary genres. In the novel, the crime of the missing girls, seems to be a basic case of disappearance, but on further crime investigation, the crime turns out to be deep rooted in the societal problems. They are hidden motives, social compulsions and personal conflicts between characters. The crime does not only involve discovering the people who made the disappearance but also to understand the underlying emotional and social issues that belong. The position of the detective is further complicated, as they must explore a net of both psychological and moral ambiguities which make the investigation tricky. The reasons of why the crime was committed are made unclear at the beginning of the story and the interpersonal relations among the characters go beyond clear-cut, further complicating the story.

Results and Discussion

The Lost Girls of Penzance (2023) by Sally Rigby is the inaugural novel in the *Cornwall Murder Mystery* series, introducing Detective Inspector Lauren Pengelly and her new second-in-command, Detective Sergeant Matt Price. Set in the tranquil town of Penzance, Cornwall. The novel begins with the finding of skeletal remains on the Trenowden Estate, which creates a great impact on the small Cornish town known as Penzance. This moment of disturbance is the inciting incident that would trigger the whole investigation. So far, Penzance has been seemingly a quiet, almost idyllic coastal town, where life follows in predictable patterns. But the finding of the bodies marks the last stage of this peace and brings a darker layer over the calm appearance of the lives of the town residents. The remains are initially unknown, and their finding instantly connects with a chain of unexplained disappearances, which makes the investigation marked with the touch of urgency and fear. The nature of the town itself adds much to this disruption of equilibrium. Being a small and tranquil coastal town, Penzance is not used to scenes of bloody crime, especially as deep rooted as the findings of a skeletal body. The story, therefore, makes an abrupt transition between the realm of a predicted idyll of quietness and a sphere of distrust, fear and doubt. The facade of peace that the town has long been clinging to goes to pieces, chaos slowly creeping in the process of the investigation. It is here that the detective figure, Detective Inspector Lauren Pengelly, enters the scene, which is not only motivated by the urge to resolve the crime but also the resolution to restore the lost balance.

The remains found at Trenowden Estate are linked to a growing number of missing girls, suggesting that the town's tranquility has been a mere illusion, masking a far more sinister presence. The news shakes the town to its core, revealing a hidden darkness that has been operating beneath the surface for years. The murderer, who was hiding behind the veil of normality, now becomes the ultimate being that poses a threat to the total being of the community. When the remains are found, and related to the prior disappearance, the instability is amplified, driving the plot to a new level of investigation, full of tension and unfamiliarity.

Lauren thoughts on how big the situation is reveal a lot. She notes: The news of the body would be one big shock to the town. And it would definitely provide my team with some experience which is much needed (p.12). This statement not only underlines the seriousness of the disruptive issue, but also the personal and professional consequences of the investigation. The tranquility that the town used to have is no more, instead, the town is full of fear and looks with suspicion and Lauren is aware that her crew will now be pushed to do what they have never done before. The investigation is not only the solving of a puzzle, but it is also the confrontation with a darkness that has been there in the shadow, that as the town has cherished the ideals of safety and security so the town has been blinded not to see that evil.

Disruption demonstrates that Penzance has a thinly held peace and Lauren as the detective becomes the

focus in the quest to finding balance once again. The case, spurred on by her desire and the magnitude of the disturbance will compel her and her team to not only uncover the crimes committed but also the greater moral and social issues provoked by these events. The stakes go higher as the story moves towards chaos and restoration and the driving force of the story is the efforts of Lauren to bring back order.

The novel also has a set of red herrings and false leads cleverly incorporated into the story to confuse the characters and the readers alike in order to heighten the suspense and the intricacy of the proceedings. The most notable red herring is the case of Terry Lipton, a criminal, one-time suspect in the case, who has a criminal history. The police discover several incriminating items at his home; include a box full of hairbands and hair ties that appear to belong to young girls. During his interrogation, Lipton vehemently denies any involvement in the disappearances. He explains that he collects the items when he finds them, claiming, If I find any lying around I take them. It's nothing to do with what's happened to Isla Hopkins. I've already told you it wasn't me. You're picking on me because of what happened in the past. I can't change that, but I'm trying to live a normal life now... if you'll let me. (p.120)

In spite of his protestations, the detectives later confirm that Lipton is not the perpetrator, as another child disappears while he is in police custody, effectively ruling him out as a suspect.

Another misdirection in the investigation comes from Eleanor Hillman, a key suspect whose involvement is initially questioned. The weird behavior of Hillman and her unknown past put her in the lead in terms of possible suspects in the abductions and at one time, it appears that the case can be solved with Hillman as the perpetrator. Nevertheless, the critical point is reached when Hillman states that she does not know where the girls disappeared since she is seemingly related to the case. The fact that Stuart Baines is a man with dubious past also misleads the detectives as they come across a caravan belonging to the man. The detectives get a tip that this caravan might be the place where the missing kids are detained. But facing Hillman, she declines to know about it saying, "I don't know. Stuart didn't—" (p.216). The fact that Hillman does not provide any definite answers only complicates the investigation and makes her involvement doubtful.

The investigation also imposes significant emphasis on Luke Hopkins, the father of Isla, because he also had a history of committing crimes. His background turns him into a good suspect, and at some point, the detectives think that his previous activities can be related to the disappearances. But as the research proceeds, it becomes obvious that Luke does not directly relate to the case in spite of the signs that at first appeared to be pointing in his direction.

Such misleading clues and red herrings are significant to the storyline and help it move along because of the anxiety and uncertainty they evoke. They depict the dynamics of crime cases where initial impressions and initial traces are misleading and that the detectives have to tread through the confusing waters of deceptions before arriving at the truth. The alternation between suspects and the existence of red herrings keep the characters and the readers in edge, bringing depth to the story as well as emphasizing the difficulties of executing a sophisticated case.

As the story progresses Lauren and Matt slowly put together the pieces of the puzzle, which leads them to their suspect, Eleanor Hillman. Nevertheless, the process is not very smooth. The search towards finding out who Hillman is, is rife with twists, turns and dead ends that confuse the detectives at every instance. Sometimes other suspects appear to arrive, pointing the investigation off in new directions only to be unmasked as red-herrings. This tense-built framework remind of the traditional whodunit, with every hint feeding into the pressure, only to be replaced by a subsequent setback. As every revelation is made, the detectives move closer to the truth, yet not without well-proportioned hindrances and setbacks.

However, resolving the case is not the end of events but rather the start of a darker discovery on the thoughts and mind of Hillman and the reasons behind her terrible acts. Hillman holds a distorted view of justice due to which she firmly believes that she can save the world by kidnapping and killing some women; it is her version of restoring the balance in the world in which she sees wrongs corrected by her actions. This

complex psychological profile turns the resolution into something more than just a matter of catching a criminal—it forces the detectives to confront the unsettling mindset that drives such horrific acts.

When Matt muttered that with good reference, Hillman could have gotten a job somewhere else, Lauren's response takes on a new significance. She realizes that the investigation is no longer just about solving a crime. Instead, it's about understanding why Hillman did what she did. Lauren reflects, so how does this relate to our missing children? And why did she end up here in Cornwall? That's what we need to find out. (p. 192).

This thought reflects the shift in Lauren's perspective. The case isn't just a mechanical sequence of events anymore. It's no longer just about identifying the criminal and wrapping up the investigation. Now, Lauren's mind is consumed with the deeper "why" behind the case. Why these women? Why now? What led Hillman to Cornwall, and what connects her to these tragic events? The investigation becomes less about solving a crime and more about understanding the broader forces at play both psychological and societal that leads someone down such a dark path.

In the novel under examination, the disruption in equilibrium is deeply illustrated through the abduction of Dani Price, the daughter of Detective Matt Price. Dani's kidnapping significantly shifts the emotional and professional balance in Matt's life. As a detective, Matt is used to dealing with cases involving other people's tragedies, but when his own daughter becomes a victim, it profoundly disrupts his equilibrium. His emotional response overrides his usual professional detachment, as shown when he says, I don't care about the crime scene. I want to be with my daughter. (P.207)

This statement highlights the personal disruption he faces, as his concern for Dani's safety takes precedence over the investigation. His emotional turmoil becomes even more evident when he finds Dani alive, though unconscious and drugged, inside a suitcase. His anger intensifies, and he declares, There's enough DNA in there for you to put that bitch away for life. (p.207). His reaction reveals how deeply the case has affected him on a personal level, turning the investigation into a much more urgent and emotionally charged pursuit.

On a psychological level, the equilibrium of the investigative team is also disrupted. The detectives, especially Matt and Lauren, are emotionally taxed by the case, and the shift in their focus from solving the crime to managing the emotional toll of the situation is evident. The personal stakes of the case make it difficult for Matt to maintain his usual composure. He is shown trying to balance his professional duties with his overwhelming concern for Dani's safety, leading to a moment where he says, We need to make sure we have enough evidence to make certain neither of them can get off on a technicality. (P.220). This reflects how the emotional weight of the case is affecting the way the investigation is being handled, with the focus shifting from simply solving the crime to ensuring that the perpetrators are brought to justice.

The investigation is a key element in the novel and it is used both as a spine to the plot and as an indicator to the emotional and psychological depth of the characters concerned. The case starts with the finding of human remains on the Trenowden Estate, then unfolded with a sequence of revelations that in turn bring the detectives nearer to their embarrassment of the criminal who perpetrates the gruesome crimes. This is, however, not a linear process, since the progressing investigation is infested with dead ends, diversions and snare maps and the spillage of important information, as the story develops.

Initial Clues and the Mounting Mystery in the novel fill an important role in establishing the setting within the early stages of the investigation to layer by layer determine a chilling trend that accelerates the plot. At the very beginning, what seems like unrelated and unconnected clues, slowly in the progression of the story, become intertwined in the lives of the involved and helps the detectives to come closer to unraveling the truth behind the case. This part discusses the events that take place in the beginning of the investigation, the importance of the leads at that beginning, and how they lead up to the mystery.

In detective fiction, especially in works that focus on psychological depth and character complexity, the restoration of equilibrium might go beyond the mere resolution of the mystery. While Todorov's model primarily focuses on the external resolution of the plot (the crime being solved, the criminal caught), novels

like *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) may explore internal or emotional restoration as well, making the equilibrium restoration more nuanced. Let's break down how this applies to character complexity, moral ambiguity, and emotional depth in the context of the novel:

Rigby's narrative thus complicates Todorov's classic detective fiction model by incorporating moral gray areas that challenge the straightforward restoration of order through the resolution of a crime. Todorov's model suggests that equilibrium is restored when a crime is solved, and the villain is apprehended. However, in *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023), the resolution of the case involves more than just catching the criminal; it requires addressing the emotional and psychological consequences of the crime. While the external disorder is resolved with Hillman's arrest, the moral and emotional fallout remains unresolved.

In the novel, Rigby transcends the boundaries of traditional detective fiction by exploring moral ambiguity through its characters and their emotional complexities. Matt Price's vulnerability, Lauren Pengelly's professional detachment, and the morally nuanced portrayal of the criminal all contribute to a narrative that challenges Todorov's straightforward model of crime resolution. The novel indicates that it is not merely a resolution of the crime that restores the balance but rather recognition and resolution of the human feelings and ethical dilemmas behind the crime and the search to uncover it.

Sally Rigby takes the exploration of the lasting psychological effects of crime, particularly the abduction of young girls to a profoundly deep and perplexing level, one might surmise, in *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023). In contrast to crime novels where the resolution is straight forward, Rigby points out that the period following such traumatic experience goes far beyond that period of resolution. Even though the victims can be physically rescued, the emotional and psychological wounds they bear last a rather long time. The horrors of being kidnapped, manipulated and being separated with their families, leaves unpleasant traces on their minds, and cannot be healed as easily as the healing of their bodies. This turmoil is reflected on the character of Detective Matt Price trying to solve the case, but also having to solve problems of his own. Matt, as the character who goes through the investigation process, emphasizes the psychological cost of dealing with the case which is also difficult and complex even to those who are doing the investigation. Rigby has eloquently described in her novel how crime is not only a matter of case closure but a matter that leaves the victim emotionally hurt and depressed in the long term. He is not the detached investigator typical of traditional detective fiction but a man deeply affected by the case. His personal experience with fatherhood, having his own young daughter, Dani, adds another layer of emotional weight to his involvement in the case. The case forces him to confront his worst fears the potential loss of his child and the emotional cost weighs heavily on him. As Rigby demonstrates, this case hits Matt hard on an emotional level, and he doesn't merely solve the crime as a professional; he becomes personally invested. This personal stake leads to moments of emotional instability, where he grapples with fear, anger, and grief. At one point, during an interview with the abductor, Matt's frustration bubbles over as he says: You've ruined the lives of three families because it'll never be the same again. (p.235). This raw emotional outburst shows how much the case has affected Matt. The act of solving the crime may restore order on a surface level, but the emotional and psychological toll it takes on him cannot be undone by merely apprehending the criminal. The trauma has changed him.

The Lost Girls of Penzance by Sally Rigby, renders the classical models of detective fiction, as discussed by Todorov, because she introduces modern investigative skills, which are likely to appear in the criminal investigation of today. In contrast to classical detective stories, which frequently dwell on logic, intuition, and deduction, the novel written by Rigby emphasizes the aspect of the application of the advanced knowledge of Forensic Science, media coverage, and cross disciplinary protocols in solving a crime. Forensic instruments such as DNA fingerprinting, behavioral profiling and electronic monitoring play central roles during the investigation and give another accurate picture compared to that obtained by classic techniques. As an example, forensic pathologists could examine the remains in order to define important information and psychological profiling could contribute to understanding the way the offender acts, which

adds depth and realistic nature to the enquiry. These new methods enhance the story and indicate the changes in the crime fiction.

Furthermore, the storyline of media investigation introduces another level of complexity into the investigation process. This is one of the most critical modern aspects of *The Lost Girls of Penzance*, that is, the influence of the media on shaping the opinion of the masses and the direction of the investigation. Rigby addresses the issues of news sensationalism and internet rumor-mongering and their ability to place law enforcement under incredible pressure. In the universe of the classical detective story, the detective will act in solitude and outside of the gaze of the general population but the modern-day investigation is no longer restricted to these confines. Similarly, in the novel the media starts to sensationalize the case leading to misinformation, and panic among the people that ends up influencing the manner in which the investigators tackle the case. The sustained pressure that the media exert on the detectives as evidenced in the line, 'With every passing moment there is a decreasing chance of finding them alive...' (p.249) creates a situation where the detectives will have to work not only with the evidence but also against the ghost of what the media and the populace may say. This development brings some complications which were not initially present in earlier detective stories where the amount of pressure and media involvement was insignificant or nonexistent. The story of Rigby displays the additional pressure of contemporary investigation, as the police officers have to not only observed the criminals that they pursue but also control the discussion in media.

In the novel Sally Rigby does not follow the standard detective fiction formula; she introduces the modern methods of investigation and uses the collaborative and efforts within a team rather than the brilliance of the detective. DI Lauren Pengelly has a circle of experts to deal with, such as forensic specialists, digital analysts, and media advisors, which underlines the multifaceted, multi-level nature of crime-solving nowadays. This is unlike in the way traditional detective fiction is characterized in that they are usually individualized and depend on insight as witnessed by detectives. The novel incorporates these novel techniques in such a way that it not only adds value to the story but it also does not lose the investigation as the central theme. The way Rigby approaches it indicates that crime fiction has developed over the years to reflect elements of modern policing in which cooperation and technology are imperative to resolve complex crimes and makes crime fiction feel more realistic to the modern world.

Such analysis of the novel under study reveals that Rigby in the novel proves quite effective in breaking the conventions of the traditional genre of detective fiction by adopting modern methods of investigation. By employing forensic science, the power of media investigation, and teamwork of the modern police work, Rigby presents a re-interpretation to the genre. Her book takes into account the facts of contemporary investigations in criminal stories where instead of a lonely genius, there is chief of a team that cooperates with a variety of specialists to solve an increasingly elaborate case. This metamorphosis of detective fiction not only contributes to the realness of Rigby, it also reflects the change in method of crime solving, in real life. The inclusion of these components is indicative of the pressure and depth of modern policing, where a scientific aspect is never far away, and the media scrutiny is constant, giving the investigation additional depth and realism.

Detective fiction has never been short of a set of accepted conventions that determine how we build and resolve mysteries in it. Recent novels, however, such as *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) by Rigby, push against these conventions, combining thorny social questions with experimental forms. Although there has been such evolution, there is prominent absence of critical approach whereby Todorov narrative theory has been used to explore how such texts either confront or diverge into the fundamental aspects of the genre. Whereas the theories proposed by Todorov have helped a great deal in analyzing traditional detective stories, they still tend not to be applied in all the works that feature different versions of the classical model today. Such lack of available research highlights the significance of a targeted Todorovian approach applied to the analysis of the novel by Rigby, as it can bring a better insight into the way in which *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) reshapes the genre of the detective story. This work informs the general discussion in the

field of how modern detective fiction is altering narrative expectations and the boundaries of the genre through the application of Todorov structural model of text to modern texts.

Conclusion

The study highlights that the typical structure of a whodunit structure is present in the story, however, the emotional impact is much heavier, allowing the investigation to go beyond a mere search of answers. As the case unfolds, it becomes clear that detecting the crime is not merely about puzzle-solving, but it is about facing the emotional toll of these crimes on them and their surroundings. Another important process in the investigation is interviewing witnesses and suspects. These interviews are not only useful in finding critical clues; they also explain the emotional impacts of the crimes in the society. They do more than merely drive the story forward, revealing more about the personal and psychological impacts to all of the involved people. It changes the emphasis on crime solving to the mind of the murderer and the emotional complexity of the situation. Eventually, *The Lost Girls of Penzance* (2023) is a must-read, challenging the boundaries of detective fiction with its high-stakes investigation that is matched with a highly emotional story. This approach invites readers to rethink the possibility of the genre and accepts the view that resolving a crime is just as much about exploring intricacies of the inner life of individuals as it is about uncovering facts.. The novel offers a new, in-depth outlook on crime and justice that broadens the scope and impact of the traditional detective story.

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