National Centre for Writing

May 2025

Harriet Martineau Lecture

CELEBRATING THE LEGACY OF A REMARKABLE, WORLD-CHANGING WOMAN

THE MARTINEAU SOCIETY

NORWICH CITY OF LITERATURE

Stuart Hobday

Founder of the Harriet Martineau Lecture

In 2012, Writers' Centre Norwich (now National Centre for Writing) was looking for ways of celebrating the non-conformist tradition of writing from Norwich that was a strong theme of the UNESCO City of Literature bid. I suggested an annual lecture would be a great way of remembering Harriet Martineau because her own oeuvre was always linked to the issues of the day and incorporated novels, short stories, economic parables, travel writing, sociological writing, campaigning journalism and autobiographical writing. In her writing career between 1830 and 1870 Martineau consistently pursued economic fairness, women's rights, anti-slavery causes, better public education, better health provision, secularism and advocated a connection to nature. So, there would be plenty for potential participants in the lecture series to respond to and that is how it has turned out.

The first Martineau Lecture was inspiringly delivered by novelist Ali Smith in 2013, lauding Martineau for championing the potential of all people — a radical notion when she wrote about it, but still very relevant today. After that initial successful lecture, the event was incorporated into the City of Literature weekend at Norfolk & Norwich Festival; very appropriate as Harriet's uncle, Philip Meadows Martineau, a surgeon, had been instrumental in founding the festival in the 18th century as a fundraiser for the hospital. The Martineau Society also came on board as a sponsor, and this has helped both the lecture and the Society.

This year marks the tenth edition of the Lecture. Over the past nine, we've heard powerful voices championing women's writing, racial equality, the value of cultural discourse, and and concern over persistent inequality. The lecture has been great for encouraging established writers to voice things they wouldn't normally have a chance to, as happened with Kate Mosse, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Kit de Waal. It's also been a stimulant for new writing, as with Sarah Perry whose assessment of the image of 'Essex Girls' led directly into her next novel. We've always said the Lecture should be in the spirit of Martineau and in that vein my own favourite lectures have been to see the courage of writers in the face of ruthless power. This was the case with Mexican journalists Lydia Cacho and Anabel Hernández exposing drug cartels, and a writer who has been a thorn in the side of Vladimir Putin — Masha Gessen. Harriet Martineau was the first woman journalist in the world and determinedly wrote 'truth to power'.

Martineau's anti-establishment writing had a cost to her reputation, and she is a writer who should be better remembered. Much of her writing is still relevant today and her own story is inspiring. She went from being a shy, deaf teenager in Norwich to a globally renowned radical who influenced world events. The lecture has been great for spreading the word about her. It has also been great as a call to audiences to take action — I've nearly always left a Martineau Lecture feeling partly inspired to get more involved with an issue. I'm sure that Harriet Martineau herself would have loved these aspects of the lecture.

Peggy Hughes,

Chief Executive of the National Centre for Writing

Born and bred right here in Norwich, Harriet Martineau achieved world-renown and acclaim for the tenacity and rigour of her thinking, her independence and her radical spirit. And yet she has been largely hidden from history and lost to the public imagination. ‘If Harry Martineau had been a man, we would all know his name’, writes Val McDermid for the tenth (!) Harriet Martineau Lecture. Putting Martineau’s name back on the map of her home city is exactly how this lecture series came to be.

It is 2013, and this was the brainchild of Stuart Hobday — writer, Martineau champion and NCW friend: why didn’t Writers’ Centre Norwich (as then we were) commission a leading writer and thinker to honour the spirit of Martineau and Norwich’s radicalism with a dazzling annual commission? Our City of Literature weekend at Norfolk & Norwich Festival was in development, and so, along with the blessing and (continued) support of The Martineau Society, a beautiful partnership and ideal platform was born.

The lecture also set out to mark the city’s brand-new designation as a UNESCO City of Literature. Norwich was awarded this prestigious title in 2012, the first City of Literature in England granted membership to a global network of literary cities who have an impressive legacy in literature, as well as a commitment to ensuring a bright present and promising future.

What better way to shine a light on the archives and the present moment with the same candle? What happier format with which to recognise Martineau’s astonishing contribution to intellectual life, in her lifetime and far beyond it, than by commissioning Ali Smith, Masha Gessen, Lydia Cacho and Anabel Hernández, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Sarah Perry, Ellah P. Wakatama, Kit de Waal, Charlotte Higgins, and now Val McDermid, to write back to her by writing forward to us?

We’re delighted to present Val McDermid’s lecture in writing here for you to keep, in addition to a collected overview of the lectures before her. We hope you enjoy it as much as we have. We hope Harriet Martineau would too.

Val McDermid

Harriet Martineau Lecture 2025

I feel very honoured to have been invited to deliver the Harriet Martineau Lecture here today. Usually all I have to do at book festivals is talk about myself, which requires no research and not a great deal of mental effort. So it's grand to have the challenge of an event that pushes me to think. Thanks for coming out to hear me only talking a bit about myself.

If Harriet Martineau had been a man, we would all know his name. Harry Martineau would be familiar to us as an economic pioneer, a trailblazing sociologist, an eloquent slavery abolitionist, a supporter of prison reform, an influential novelist, and a campaigning journalist – all this in spite of being challenged by extreme deafness. But Harry was Harriet, erased from the popular mind, consigned to oblivion like so many women who broke the conventions of their time. Ali Smith's suggestion in the first Harriet Martineau lecture that her picture adorn the five pound note wouldn't have seemed at all preposterous if Harriet had been Harry; it would probably have already happened.

I consider myself a feminist with a good working knowledge of popular literature. I even

have a degree in English Language and Literature from Oxford University, for heaven's sake. But to my shame I had no memory of having ever heard the name of Harriet Martineau before the email arrived in my inbox inviting me to deliver this lecture. However, I reckoned that if this was an event under the aegis of the Norfolk & Norwich Festival, supported by the National Centre for Writing, there must be something rather special about Harriet Martineau and it was about time I put my ignorance to the sword.

As soon as I googled her name, the red tide of embarrassment crept up my neck. How could I not have encountered this remarkable woman? In her lecture to the Women's Service League on Professions for Women, Virginia Woolf cites five notable women writers who 'cut the road many years ago' and 'made the path smooth' for her and her fellow women writers. Fanny Burney, Aphra Behn, Harriet Martineau, Jane Austen and George Eliot. I was familiar with the work and the significance of four of these women but somehow, my mind had skipped over Harriet Martineau.

This seemed all the more extraordinary to me since Harriet was born and bred here in Norwich, a UNESCO City of Literature. Usually, cities with that designation dig deep and wide in their history for the most casual connection with eminent writers then trumpet them from the rooftops of their grandest libraries. I know this because I bring greetings from my home city of Edinburgh, the world's first UNESCO City of Literature. And yet... in 2017 I was commissioned to create an event to usher in the New Year there with an outdoor light installation that would celebrate some aspect of literature. What I chose to celebrate was another woman writer who had been overlooked and largely forgotten by the city of her birth. Susan Ferrier was a novelist described by Sir Walter Scott as his natural successor. She outsold Jane Austen in her lifetime, she earned much bigger advances – something we writers always appreciate – and her novels encompassing social criticism and comedy were translated and widely enjoyed at home and abroad. And yet she had been allowed to disappear from the litany of Edinburgh's notable writers. The city's Writers Museum celebrates only the lives of three men – Robert Burns (born in Ayrshire, spent two years living in Edinburgh), Walter Scott (who divided his time between the city and his beloved Borders estates) and Robert Louis Stevenson (who spent most of his writerly life in Europe, the West coast of America and the South Seas). Not a single mention of Susan Ferrier, despite the museum being literally in the courtyard of her birthplace.

> "Women of great ability, power and achievement are often overpainted when the history of the place and time are written

So I suppose I should not have been too surprised at the submerging of Harriet Martineau. Women of great ability, power and achievement are often overpainted when the history of the place and time are written. I've been exploring this very phenomenon myself in my most recent book. It's not a crime novel – it's what my agent calls a side gig. The Scottish indie publisher Polygon/Birlinn has started a list called Darkland Tales, where they invite authors to revisit the myths and stories by which we have come to define ourselves.

And so many of those involve the misrepresentation of women. So far, the series has revisited received versions of events around Mary Queen of Scots, a witch trial, and Flora Macdonald's role in Bonnie Prince Charlie's escape after the catastrophic battle of Culloden. I was invited to write about Lady Macbeth and I chose to look at her through the lens of history – the real woman of royal lineage whose second husband was Macbeth. There's a lot we don't know about early 11th century Scotland but one thing we can be sure of – Macbeth's wife was not a power-hungry psychopath who pushed her husband into assassinating the king and seizing his throne. But it suited Shakespeare to spirit away the real woman and transform her into a scary monster. Because he was trying to protect his livelihood by sucking up to the new king, James 1st and 6th, whose line of descent to the Scottish throne came not through the Macbeths but through Banquo.

The truth is that Macbeth did kill King Duncan but not in a dark corner of his castle with a dagger. They fought on the battlefield, and Macbeth was the victor, as fair and square as anything ever was on a medieval battlefield! Once on the throne, the Macbeths forged the union of early independent kingdoms that paved the way for modern Scotland. They reigned side by side, peacefully, for seventeen years. So peacefully they were able to leave their kingdom in the hands of a regent and make a pilgrimage to Rome without losing their thrones to one of their bloodthirsty neighbours. How did they do it? Ah well, you'll have to read *Queen Macbeth* to find out...

So in that sense, I wasn't too surprised by what happened to Harriet Martineau. It's what has happened to so many women who've achieved success in a man's world. But one of the things that continues to impress me about Harriet is that she didn't whinge about how hard it all was. When her father's business collapsed and the previously prosperous family fell on hard times, she knew she'd have to earn a living. She didn't whinge about that loss of privilege. The most common avenue for women of her background cast on their own resources was to become a governess to young women whose families had been more fortunate than hers. That option wasn't available to Harriet because of the progressive loss of hearing that had struck while she was still a child. But there's no sign of her crying, 'Poor me!' Quite the opposite, in fact. She described the failure of the family business as, 'one of the best things that ever happened to us' because it allowed her the freedom to 'truly live instead of vegetate.'

Nor did she throw herself on the mercy of others. She'd always been interested in the world around her, and she'd grown up in a nonconformist household that allowed women to have some education. When she was nine she was sent to a small local school where she developed an interest in topics that would shape her lifelong interests: Shakespeare, political economy, philosophy and history. Later, she was sent to a girls' boarding school that her aunt and uncle ran in Bristol. The standard curriculum wasn't enough to satisfy her, and she began to pursue her own self-directed studies. She chose to devote herself to Latin, Greek and Italian and theology. But like all of us, particularly us women, she suffered insecurities – her difficulty with hearing, her poor handwriting, and how to manage her unruly hair. Long before the tyranny of selfies, we women judged ourselves by the most superficial things.

Bad hair days notwithstanding, Harriet clearly took advantage of the society she found herself in, enjoying the discourse in spite of needing a large ear-trumpet. Norwich in the early 19th century was a place of debate and discussion, of all kinds of radicalism and

hunger for reform. Harriet was actually born in the same room as Elizabeth Fry had been a couple of decades earlier. It would be fanciful to suggest she absorbed her open-minded radicalism from the very bricks, but it's not so ridiculous to imagine there was something in the air in this city, a spirit of questioning and debating and eagerness to embrace ideas.

But Harriet was much more than a sponge who soaked up what was around her. She was creative. But we all need someone to spur us on to believe in that aspect of ourselves. For Harriet, that was her favourite brother James who encouraged her to write to him when he went off to Oxford. That correspondence gave her a taste for putting pen to paper and expressing herself. She started writing anonymously for Unitarian publications but before long, she dipped her pen in fiction, publishing a couple of novels. Neither *Principle and Practice* nor *Sense and Sentiment*, in spite of their Austen-esque titles, made much of a splash. But they did well enough to persuade the editors of *The Monthly Register* to pay her for articles. She won prizes for her work and began to establish a reputation for being a reliable contributor. She would go on to become the first woman journalist ever to be kept on a retainer. What in my day we'd have called a regular casual.

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I can only imagine how tough that must have been. A century and a half later I was a young journalist, and being a woman in that world often felt like being trapped in the worst kind of Victorian novel. If the male reporters had had mustachios to twirl, trust me, they'd have been doing it. I was one of only three female staff reporters on a national Scottish newspaper, and we were not allowed to be on shift together because the management were convinced that we'd just sit around drinking tea and gossiping. (Of course, when men sit around drinking beer and talking about football, that's serious and weighty debate...) Women reporters had only been permitted to wear trousers in the office six months before my arrival. Apparently Harriet took up smoking a pipe in later life. I can only think it was a kind of revenge against the smoke-filled rooms of the newspapers she'd endured in her younger years.

Harriet was receptive to the ideas of the time, and she was a reader. Politics, economics and science all contributed to the tapestry of her mind. The work of John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith intrigued her and she decided there must be a way to communicate economic ideas simply and directly to people. So she found the nerve to pitch a publisher – and all of us writers know how nerve-wracking that is -- and she secured a commission to write a popular book that would explain those ideas to people who were not economists. This turned out to be the first in a series of the Victorian equivalent of *Economics for Dummies*. She took the ideas of the economic and social theorists, stripped them of abstruse jargon and turned them into fiction. Her parables translated

complex principles and suggestions for living that made sense to her readers. The pamphlets were a huge success, garnering more readers than Dickens at home and abroad and dispelling the spectre of poverty for Harriet. Even the Tsar of Russia expressed his approval of her fictions about economics. Though when Harriet heard about that, she promptly wrote a new story set in Russia, castigating the Tsar himself for allowing the persecution of the Polish people. She was promptly banned from Russia, something she boasted about to the end of her life. Even the young Princess Victoria read her work, and Harriet was invited to her coronation. She reportedly took a book with her in case of boredom… I suspect I'm not the only one who knows that feeling!

And her work still stands up to scrutiny. Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves writes about her in her latest book, *The Women Who Made Modern Economics*. Although Reeves doesn't hold back in her disagreement with Harriet's support of free trade, free markets and limited interference of the state in the lives of its citizens, she gives her due credit for the extraordinary achievement of making political economy accessible in spite of the misogyny and prejudice she encountered along the way – something today's female politicians still know all about. Harriet was constantly insulted for her lack of looks and feminine wiles as if that somehow undermined the quality of her mind, but she never allowed that to deter her. Even Reeves acknowledges that Harriet's belief in the free market provided her with ammunition in her subsequent campaigns against slavery and for equal pay.

It became clear to Harriet that if she was going to further her ambitions, she needed to move to London, where there was a much bigger market for the kind of work she wanted to pursue, as well as a wider circle of movers and shakers to spend time with. She'd already made the acquaintance of Charles Darwin's elder brother, Erasmus, and once she moved to London, she swiftly became part of a much wider group of thinkers and writers than even Norwich could offer. Some of the people she spent time with and who clearly fed her own ideas included: Harriet Taylor Mill, a philosopher and women's rights advocate who became John Stuart Mill's second wife, and Mill himself; Alexander Maconchie, the prison reformer and first Professor of Geography at University College, London; Thomas Malthus, whose views on demographics and population growth still inform debate today; humourist, literary critic and founder of the Edinburgh Review Sydney Smith, still famous in the US for his rhyming recipe for salad dressing, which I very much doubt Harriet adopted:

Two boiled potatoes, strained through a kitchen sieve,
Softness and smoothness to the salad give;
Of mordant mustard take a single spoon—
Distrust the condiment that bites too soon;
Yet deem it not, thou man of taste, a fault,
To add a double quantity of salt.

Frankly, it lacks the extra virgin olive oil I'd want to douse it with…

Also in her circle were notable writers including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Carlyle and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whose most lasting legacy is probably the opening line, 'It was a dark and stormy night.'

Writing, particularly non-fiction was still not considered to be an appropriate job for a woman, but the people she mixed with in London seemed untroubled by this. But even Harriet teetered on the edge of falling into that trap on occasion. The Brontë sisters chose to publish under male pseudonyms in order to be taken seriously. Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell sounded like men, having adopted their aliases to avoid the disdain shown to many female authors. Charlotte, Emily and Anne hid in the shadows while their alter egos achieved success and renown. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* in particular was the subject of much debate; could such a novel, with its insights into the eponymous heroine, have been written by a man? But on the other hand, could a woman have written so well? Charlotte, in the guise of Currer Bell, had arranged to visit Harriet, who had herself been rumoured to be the true author of *Jane Eyre*. This apparently prompted a heated discussion ahead of the visit as to whether Currer Bell would turn out to be a man or a woman. In the event, it was a pleasant surprise, and the two women had a brief but intense friendship which ultimately ended over Harriet's critical views about *Villette*. I can't help seeing that as a very Harriet reason for a falling out.

All of this engagement with others was obviously important for Harriet, feeding her mind and her work. But for me, what makes Harriet Martineau so significant is this: almost by accident, she'd discovered a principle that has come to underpin so much of the fiction we routinely consume – the subversive principle that it's possible to shine a light on the way we live and change what people think, not by direct argument but by more subtle means.

I don't know about you, but as a reader, I love books that make me look again at the world, that inform me and invite me to consider why I believe what I believe. Books that stay with me long after I've closed the covers because the story has moved me. Outraged me. Warned me. Or warmed me. Or made me wonder how it can possibly be that a single Jane Austen novel means something very different to me at sixty than it did at seventeen or thirty-nine?

With her works of economic fiction, Harriet found a way to change people's perception of the world and that to me is the most significant element of her achievement. Can you tell I'm not an economist?

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Let me tell you a bit about my story. I wanted to be a writer from the age of nine. I was an avid reader of the Chalet School novels, a series of girls' school stories set in the Tirol. When I was a child, most children's series fiction were not series at all. Like the Famous Five, which all seem to take place in the same sempiternal summer. Nobody gets any older. Nobody learns any lessons from their experiences. Nobody ever has a moment of self-reflection – 'Don't go into that deep dark cave, remember the bad thing that happened the last time we went into a deep dark cave?' No event has consequences beyond itself.

The Chalet School was different. Each book covered a term or a year in the life of the school. And events did have consequences. If you broke your leg tobogganing, you were still limping three books later. Girls grew up, left school, went on to higher education, had careers, got married, had children. One, improbably for the mid 20th century, had thirteen of them, including a set of triplets and two sets of twins. Crucially for my story, as well as her thirteen children, that particular character also became a writer of school stories. This seems very meta to us now, but at the time, I swallowed it whole.

What changed my life was a single paragraph in one of the Chalet School books. I grew up in a working class household in a small town in Scotland where the industrial economy revolved around the manufacture of linoleum, the spinning of linen and the mining of coal. I knew no writers. My big cousin Senga had been the first in the extended family to go to university as a mature student but nobody really understood why she'd given up a successful career in nursing for sociology, whatever that was, never mind how it might lead to a job.

What transformed my life was a letter sent to the fictional author of fiction by her fictional publisher. It contained a cheque. (I'm sure some of you still remember what a cheque was?) That was a moment of epiphany for me. People were paid money for writing books! In that moment, I knew exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up. I thought, I could do that. I could make stuff up. I could tell lies! That door that Harriet Martineau had edged open a crack expanded into a wide and inviting horizon in that moment.

My debt to the Chalet School doesn't end there, either. Once I'd decided I wanted to be a writer I knew I needed to expand my horizons. I wanted to escape the narrow confines of the world I'd grown up in. I always felt on the edge of things, an outsider trying to fit in and never quite succeeding. I thought this was because of the decision I'd made about becoming a writer, because I understood that writers have to maintain some level of detachment – as Graham Greene famously said, 'There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer. I watched and listened. There was something which one day I might need.' And there is some truth in that – I'd beaten all the odds to become the first girl from a Scottish state school to shoehorn my way into St Hilda's College, Oxford, and I was very aware of my position as an outsider. Years later, at a reunion, one of my cohort commented that I'd always been perceived as being exotic. (Any of you who is familiar with Fife will understand how I hooted with laughter at the idea of it being in any way exotic. I mean, we only had three vegetables…) But I was determined to seize every opportunity to watch and learn. Not merely to blend in, but, I suppose, to spy.

In my second year at Oxford, a friend lent me a copy of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. It was my first direct encounter with an openly feminist text. Of course I'd read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and understood what she was saying. But I couldn't help feeling it came from a place of privilege. Nobody in my world was going to give me the equivalent of £500 a year and a quiet place to work. I might as well have expected to find a handy lamp with a genie inside. Reading Millett was a different experience. *Sexual Politics* is primarily a book of literary criticism from a feminist perspective. By now, this was a familiar form for me. I was studying English, and I understood the function of lit crit. But I'd never read anything like this book. I suspect the readers of Harriet Martineau's economics primers felt a similar excited awakening. Here was something challenging but

also illuminating, and it made me see the world of words in a completely fresh way. I couldn't stop talking about it, which must have driven everyone around me mad.

I turned up to my next tutorial still on fire from Millett's words. I barely paused for breath in the first ten minutes as I poured out my new revelations about English literature. Let me just set the scene. My tutor was a very ladylike Englishwoman in middle age. She wore elegantly tailored suits, her hair was always perfectly coifed in a pure white chignon, she had a placid beauty and a mind like a steel trap. I learned very quickly never to make an unsupported statement in her tutorials. She was a devout Christian, but she drank and smoked, although never before 6pm. I always booked the six o'clock tutorial with her, because that was when the sherry came out. So, picture the scene. Dusk outside the windows, Magdalen Tower across the meadow, outlined against the sky. And me, talking a mile a minute about this extraordinary damascene moment I'd just experienced.

My tutor listened in silence, nodding occasionally. When I finally stopped for breath, she smiled and said, 'Ah yes, dear Kate.'

My utter confusion must have been written large across my face. 'Dear Kate'? She went on, 'I was her supervisor for the D Phil thesis that became sexual politics.'

I was dumbfounded. I wondered how on earth the pair of them had negotiated this territory, from what apparently were opposite sides of the debate. What I was forgetting was the sheer joy of intellectual sparring that provokes both sides to their absolutely top game. Harriet Martineau would have understood that; she had no fear when it came to defending her position and challenging the views of others.

I tell you, I would give anything to have been a fly on the wall in those supervision meetings, to eavesdrop on two brilliant women arguing their polar opposite points of view.

Harriet Martineau was always fearless when it came to calling out injustice wherever she found it. After her sojourn in London, she travelled to the USA where she was shocked by the practice of slavery. She immediately took up the cudgels on behalf of enslaved people and those abolitionists who stood against the slave owners. She wrote passionately and effectively about the plight of slaves. Her book, *Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War* contains more than fifty essays and articles that are filled with penetrating analysis on the subject. When he unveiled a statue of Harriet in December 1883 at the Old South Meeting House in Boston, she was referred as the greatest American abolitionist' by Wendell Phillips, himself a lawyer described as the one white American wholly colour-blind and free from race prejudice. Now the 8ft marble statue stands

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in Wellesley College, considered the best woman's college in the world. Harriet was no narrow blue-stocking, however. She spoke to anyone who had a story to tell; I think part of the reason for the breadth and depth of her writing and campaigning on the subject may well have been because she was not taken too seriously because of her gender. I certainly think that I succeeded in getting across doorsteps that were closed to my male colleagues back when I was a journalist because I was a woman. Not sufficiently glamorous to be a threat to women, not challenging in any way to men. They treated me like a sister or an auntie. People who didn't know Harriet probably felt the same about this untidy woman with her ear trumpet.

Nevertheless her writings skewered those she considered to be in the wrong. As does the best of contemporary crime fiction. But it wasn't always thus.

After a couple of false starts in my bid to become a writer, I decided I should try my hand at crime fiction. I'd loved the genre since I discovered my first Agatha Christie around the age of nine. It was *The Murder at the Vicarage* and it captivated me. I think I was fortunate to have started with that particular book. It's Miss Marple's debut and it shows Christie at the peak of her powers. I understand now that a large part of the reason it captivated me was her command of structure. There's the overarching umbrella plot of the murder of Colonel Protheroe – that's not a spoiler, by the way, he dies in the first chapter – but beneath that there is a series of intersecting subplots that all have the classic form: set-up, development, pay-off – so there is always something happening to hold the reader's interest and keep the story moving along. I didn't realise all that at the age of nine, obviously, I wasn't THAT precocious! But I liked what I'd read and I was thrilled when I realised Agatha Christie had written more than one book.

In the way that addicts can look back at that first fix and pinpoint where they became hooked, I can blame *The Murder at the Vicarage*. From that point on, whatever else I was reading, I always had a crime novel on the go. I'd sneaked my mother's library tickets to gain access to the adult library – and let me tell you, Kirkcaldy Library had an enviable collection of crime fiction, classic and more contemporary, British and American. I was never short of something to feed my habit.

But ultimately, they all conformed to a similar pattern. Like the children's series I grew frustrated by, there were too many books that had no consequences beyond the villain being unmasked and handed over to the police. Miss Marple never reflects on how it is that all her friends are dead or suspect. Poirot never stops to consider that he might be mistaken – and if you think Poirot is infallible, I commend to you the French critic Pierre Bayard's affectionate and entertaining dissection and reassembly of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Bayard's book makes a very convincing case for Poirot getting it completely wrong. But I'm wandering from my point, which is that those classic crime novels seldom have any subtext. They make no demands of the reader. We don't come away questioning social norms or wondering whether our ideas of how the world works might be mistaken, except when we're confronted in the here and now with outdated prejudices that offend us. So when I thought about writing a crime novel, I was uncertain whether I could satisfy myself, never mind the reader. UK crime fiction at that time fell broadly into two camps: the Home Counties village mysteries and police procedurals. And I didn't feel I could write either of those. I grew up around mining communities – St Mary Mead might as well have

been science fiction for all it connected to my own world. We had no retired zcolonels of the Indian Army or spinsters with herbaceous borders. We didn't even have vicars with vicarages, we had ministers with manses. And police procedurals presented a similar problem. I didn't really know enough about the police to feel comfortable writing about lovely decent bobbies; my own experiences as a student being policed on demos by heavy-handed coppers didn't fill me with a burning desire to find out either. I didn't believe in the decency of Inspector Wexford or the poetics of Adam Dalgliesh. It was some years later when I confessed this to Colin Dexter who burst out laughing and said, 'My dear, I had written five Inspector Morse novels before I had set foot in a police station. You just make it up.'

What changed was something very simple. A friend from Oxford who had moved to the US sent me a copy of Sara Paretsky's first novel, *Indemnity Only*. It introduced the Chicago private eye V I Warshawski. Vic to her friends. And she was a young woman with a brain and a sense of humour, and most importantly, agency. She did her own heavy lifting. She had a blue collar background, and she was rooted in her community. The crimes she investigated were also rooted in her city – they happened because of the jobs people did, the influence of local politics, the in-built prejudices people faced. I fell in love. This was the kind of book wanted to write, a book that took me into someone else's world and addressed the things that were wrong beyond the singular crime at the heart of it.

I saw on the page what I'd intuited but never really seen in a crime novel before. That murder isn't something that happens in a vacuum. That first Paretsky novel dealt with insurance fraud, but it dealt with it in terms of the lives of those affected by its commission, both the villains and the victims. Her next novel, *Dead Lock*, dealt with corruption in the world of Great Lakes shipping. The next, *Killing Orders*, addressed misbehaviour and financial shenanigans in the Catholic church.

She wasn't alone in writing crime fiction that wrapped up feminist issues along with social and political ills in the garb of a crime novel. Sara Paretsky was just one of a new wave of feminist writers whose work pointed out discrimination and misogyny not by banging a drum and ramming their arguments down our throats. Whether they knew it or not – and they probably didn't – they were following in Harriet Martineau's footsteps, telling enthralling stories whose underlying messages sank in whether readers noticed or not.

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Whether they knew it or not — and they probably didn't — they were following in Harriet Martineau's footsteps

There was Sue Grafton whose detective Kinsey Millhone investigated wrongful convictions, big business corruption and family secrets that had wider consequences. There was Barbara Wilson, whose lesbian detective Pam Nilssen dealt with teenage prostitution and sexual violence and whose portraits of a right-on printing collective didn't pretend that everything was rosy in their counter-culture universe.

I'd found my niche. Although I definitely didn't know it, I was walking that road first cut by Harriet Martineau and made smooth for those of us following behind. I knew now the kind of book I wanted to write. I started in 1987 with the first of my five different series detectives, lesbian journalist Lindsay Gordon. In her debut, *Report for Murder* -- she mockingly describes herself as 'a cynical socialist lesbian feminist journalist.'—I did become more subtle as I learned my craft, honestly! – but there is a point to that description. The crime takes place in a girls' boarding school, and it hinges on a swirl of motives from love gone sour to greed. But at its heart, the shark swimming under the surface is class and the corruption that leads to. And Lindsay herself does have to deal with the apparent contradiction between her personal beliefs and her job on a tabloid newspapers – a dilemma that reflected much of my own experience at the time.

Lindsay goes on to investigate dirty work at the crossroads as the security services try to undermine a women's peace camp; the preservation of public reputation by stealing someone else's work; corruption within a trade union, and other incidences of murder being committed at the service of some other kind of crime.

I believe a successful literary career depends on three things. You have to have a modicum of talent; you have to be prepared to work hard even when it feels like you're getting nowhere; and you have to have unpredictable moments of luck.

For me, that first serendipity came from the work of those American women writers who showed there was a different way of writing crime fiction. They found a readership in the UK, and because there's nothing publishers love more than a bandwagon to jump on, there was suddenly a market for my book. Five years earlier, nobody would have wanted it. Five years later, the market had moved on and there would have been no space for it.

But I survived. And alongside me, other crime writers learned the lesson I'd taken to heart from the likes of Sara Paretsky and Barbara Wilson. Now, the best of crime fiction shines a light on the society we live in. It's a genre that's perfectly placed to write with subtlety and intensity and insight into our society. We can go anywhere in our novels, from the highest in the land to the dispossessed and lost. The victims of our crimes can be anyone; the witnesses can come from any stratum in society; the investigators have back stories as do the journalists covering the crimes. When readers want to know what life is like in Victorian England, they turn to Dickens. I believe that in a hundred years, when people want to know how we live now, they'll turn to crime novels, because Harriet Martineau paved the way for us to write about fact in fiction.

That understanding has allowed me to write other kinds of books. When I was a journalist, I encountered stories that I couldn't tell in print. Usually because the office lawyers killed them, on the basis that we'd end up losing the inevitable libel action. I'll give you one example. In 1976, when I was a trainee journalist, I was sent out one summer Saturday to interview a TV star who was appearing at a local fete, raising money for charity. That TV star was Jimmy Savile. When we were speaking in public, his TV persona was on full wattage. When we were alone in his caravan, he was quite different. He was coarse and arrogant, lecturing me on the questions I should be asking and refusing to answer anything he didn't want to talk about. I came away thinking he was a horrible individual. But of course, that wasn't the story my editor wanted; raising money for charity was far more important than a baby journalist's instinctive revulsion.

Years later, I was working on a Sunday tabloid in Manchester. Over the years, several people contacted us with allegations about Savile and sexual offences. By their nature, sexual offences seldom have independent witnesses. Strike one. For most victims, it takes a long time, often years or decades, to be able to talk about it, so no forensics. Strike two. Savile was also very litigious; at any sign of an investigation into his behaviour, journalists would get a lawyer's letter threatening an injunction. And, to be honest, the people who came to us were damaged. Some had a history of mental health problems, some had issues with drink or prescription medication. It would have been an act of cruelty to put them in the witness box against a top QC. Strike three. And so Savile continued on his merry way, hanging out with Margaret Thatcher and being knighted by the Queen.

In 1994 I was in the US while the OJ Simpson circus was rolling through LA. It seemed to me that the old protection that had been granted to the lords of the manor or the church was now extended to anyone famous enough. And I remembered Savile and I wrote a book called The Wire in the Blood. I thought I was sailing close to the wind – my character had many resemblances to Savile in terms of career and charitable work, but I made him handsome and charming. Readers had several suggestions as to who I'd modelled the character on – nobody guessed the right answer but I had to make a lot of hasty denials!

I've done this more than once now – told a story as a fiction that couldn't be told in journalistic form. We see it happen on TV now – many news stories had been written about the Post Office scandal, but it took a TV drama for people to pay attention. Harriet Martineau would have been all over that!

One of the other ways I've used this principle of using fiction to explain or illuminate fact is with my Karen Pirie cold case novels. So often, we forget the recent past. Events that were all over the headlines at the time somehow seem to slip out of our consciousness. But by setting a cold case in the thick of them, I have the opportunity to remind people of recent history, and reveal aspects of events that escaped their notice at the time. *In A Darker Domain*, the contemporary story is set against the miners' strike of 1984. When the book came out and I was touring it, I was shocked that in the parts of the south of England where there were no mining communities, readers thought I had made up the hardships endured by the miners and their families because it hadn't been covered by the newspapers they read. I had the same response with *The Skeleton Road*, where readers thought I was exaggerating the atrocities of the Balkan conflict of the 1990s. Trust me, there was no overstating of those horrors.

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So the next time you pick up a novel that reveals us to ourselves, that uses fiction to awaken our consciences and our consciousness, remember Harriet Martineau. A multi-faceted woman of talent, principle and energy, who was determined to look at the world as it is and bring us despatches from the front. She shouldn't be on the five pound note, because we don't use them so often these days, thanks to inflation. Let's have her on the twenty pound note, so we can drop her casually into conversation every time we spend one. 'Isn't it lovely to see Harriet Martineau's picture? What? You don't know who she is? Let me tell you a story…'

One of the UK's most accomplished and respected novelists, Val McDermid has sold over 19 million books to date across the globe and is translated into more than 40 languages. She is perhaps best-known for her Wire in the Blood series, featuring clinical psychologist Dr Tony Hill and DCI Carol Jordan, which was adapted for television starring Robson Green and Hermione Norris. She has written four other series: private detective Kate Brannigan, journalist Lindsay Gordon, cold case detective Karen Pirie, whose debut appearance in The Distant Echo is now a major ITV series. The second in the series, 1989 *was published in paperback in February 2023. Val has also published several award-winning standalone novels, books of non-fiction, short story collections and a children's picture book,* My Granny is a Pirate. *Val returns to Karen Pirie with her latest book,* Past Lying.

Val has won many awards internationally, including the CWA Gold Dagger for best crime novel of the year, the CWA Cartier Diamond Dagger, the Grand Prix des Romans D'Aventure, the Lambda Literary Foundation Pioneer Award, the Stonewall Writer of the Year and the LA Times Book of the Year Award.

The Harriet Martineau Lecture invites globally-renowned radical speakers to respond to her life and work.

These lectures explore Martineau's internationalism, inspiration for feminism, and role in the abolition of slavery.

Val McDermid

For her lecture, bestselling crime writer Val McDermid explored how Harriet Martineau's daring writing indirectly inspired her own.

2025

Charlotte Higgins

Award-winning author and *Guardian* chief culture writer Charlotte Higgins discussed the power of culture as a lens through which to understand current conflicts.

2023

Kit de Waal

Bestselling novelist and literary activist Kit de Waal gave a thought-provoking lecture covering human rights, equality, hunger and 'compassion without judgement'.

2022

Ellah P. Wakatama

Esteemed editor and publisher Ellah P. Wakatama collaborated with Sierra Leonian artist Juliannknxx to produce the first Harriet Martineau Lecture by film titled ‘None but Ourselves’.

2021

Sarah Perry

For her lecture, bestselling author Sarah Perry explored the notion of the ‘Essex girl’, invoking unexpected moments from history and popular culture.

2019

Lydia Cacho & Anabel Hernández

Two of Mexico’s finest journalists described their campaign to lay bare the shocking corruption and violence of the government through writing.

2017

Linton Kwesi Johnson

World-renowned reggae poet Linton Kwesi Johnson considered an underexplored dimension to Martineau’s writings for his lecture: her campaigning on behalf of Black emancipation.

2016

Masha Gessen

Celebrated journalist, author and activist Masha Gessen delivered the third Harriet Martineau Lecture, exploring freedom of speech and investigative journalism.

2015

Kate Mosse

For her lecture, writer Kate Mosse drew on her own experiences as a novelist and cultural commentator to reflect on Martineau's legacy and life.

2014

Ali Smith

Award-winning novelist Ali Smith delivered the inaugural Harriet Martineau Lecture in 2013, where she led a call to draw Harriet Martineau's face onto £5 notes in protest at the decision to remove Elizabeth Fry from the same note.

2013

National Centre for Writing

The National Centre for Writing, based in the heart of England's first City of Literature, is a vibrant hub celebrating the transformative power of stories. Its year-round programme offers inspiring opportunities to connect, learn, and create — through events, residencies, collaborations, and activities for writers, literary translators, and readers. As a charity, the Centre works with children, young people, families, and older adults, empowering them to explore their voices and use creative expression to reflect on the past and shape the future.

Find out more: nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk

The Martineau Society

The Martineau Society aims to highlight the principles of freedom of conscience advocated in the nineteenth century by Harriet Martineau and her brother, Dr. James Martineau.

Find out more: martineausociety.co.uk

Norfolk & Norwich Festival

The Harriet Martineau Lecture is presented at Norfolk & Norwich Festival each year. Since 2013, National Centre for Writing has worked together with Norfolk & Norwich Festival to programme a 'City of Literature' strand of books, words and ideas into their annual programme.

Find out more: nnfestival.org.uk

National Centre for Writing

NORWICH CITY OF LITERATURE

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