

IWWA Falmouth Conference abstract: Rebecca Lloyd

The bloody themed guest house: Gothic cozy crime for feminists in Mandy Morton's *The Cat and the Pendulum* (2022)

Mandy Morton's novel forms part of her 'The No. 2 Feline Detective Agency' series wherein, as the title indicates, cats solve crimes, usually murders. This description apparently firmly places the work as an instance of 'cozy crime', a subgenre frequently criticised, as Marilyn Stasio's 1992 article insists, for being 'Murder Least Foul', notable for their 'nonthreatening content and nonviolent characters'.

However, Morton's fiction is anything but the comfortable and comforting sop that Stasio suggests. Set in a world entirely populated by cats, there is a clear feminist thread to the work as Morton engages not just the history of crime fiction but, particularly in *The Cat and the Pendulum*, also the problematic nature of true crime representations of murdered women. Inspired by Hallie Rubenhold's *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (2019), Morton juxtaposes the fiction of Agatha Christie with a critique of the treatment of real female victims as sensational fodder for tourism and commercial profiteering. All the personae are felines, (Christie is affectionately and humorously reconfigured as Agatha Crispy, a novelist cat who loves her cream), but this is not, as Stasio would have it, about softness and laziness. Rather, Morton draws on Gothic images of terror and horror to underpin the violence and brutality done to women, in life and in fiction.

The novel is an example of 'the inventive style modifications' that Stasio begrudgingly acknowledges in cosy fiction, in its hybridity. But more, I argue, as a postmodernist juxtaposition of form and content, darkness and humour, Morton develops a powerful critique of social and cultural issues. Feminists like cats too.