

**COCKTAILS, CRIMINALS AND COVER STORIES:
Cindy Thomas as a 21st Century Female
Journalist in the
“Women’s Murder Club” Series**

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Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture

ABSTRACT

In James Patterson's mystery series titled *The Women's Murder Club*, Patterson features four female protagonists who are all successful, powerful, career-driven women working in male-dominated professions. One of these women, Cindy Thomas, is a young, blonde, up-and-coming journalist who works the crime desk at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Cindy is unmarried, fearless, and a pioneer in many ways when it comes to being a female reporter. Throughout the nine novels, Cindy challenges many stereotypes of women journalists while embracing many others. Overall, Cindy encapsulates a progressive, modern version of the image of the female journalist in popular culture.

AN INTRODUCTION

Women's Murder Club is a series of nine books written by novelist James Patterson. The author specializes in mysteries and thrillers, and in the last three years has sold more books than any other author.¹ In total, Patterson has sold approximately 220 million books worldwide.² This prominence indicates that Patterson's writing has had a measurable impact and influence on contemporary readers, making his depiction of journalists valuable to the current image of the journalist in popular culture.

Patterson's book series, *Women's Murder Club* includes nine novels and a tenth scheduled for release in May 2011. Patterson began publishing the series in 2001, and by 2007 the *Women's Murder Club* had been turned into a television series that ran for one season on ABC. The series premiere attracted 11 million viewers, but viewer reception was mixed and the show soon lost its footing.³

The *Women's Murder Club* book series and TV show takes the concept of a "good ol' boys' club" and flips it on its head. "Boys' clubs" have dominated many high-powered professions for decades, and reinforce the idea that men and women are not on equal footing in the workplace⁴. By simply being men, they are often afforded career advantages that women are not. The stereotypical image of middle-aged white men sitting around a table, puffing cigars and drinking cognac is turned inside out and their overarching power is usurped by the dynamic, beautiful and hard-working women of the *Women's Murder Club*.

Women's Murder Club is set in San Francisco and features four female protagonists who all work in high-powered, typically male-dominated professions. These include deputy district attorney, chief medical examiner, homicide detective and journalist.

The deputy district attorney is Jill for part of the series, and when she is later killed, Jill is replaced by the equally fiery Yuki Castellano. Yuki is a petite Japanese-American woman who is extremely ambitious and a fast-talker.⁵ She often helps secure search warrants for her friends, expedites litigation and works the law from the inside.

Claire Washburn, the medical examiner, is a voluptuous, African-American mother of two (and later in the series, three) and wife to a musician who's in the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.⁶

Lindsay Boxer, a homicide detective, loves beer, microwave dinners and running with her border collie, Martha⁷. She is the central protagonist in the series and drives most of the narrative plot points. Lindsay often enlists the help of her Women's Murder Club cohorts to help her catch murderers, chase down leads, and provide insight into difficult cases.

Cindy Thomas is the newest member of the group and a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Cindy is young, blonde and hip, likes yoga and jazz.⁸

Cindy's relationship with Lindsay is tethered by professional obligations; Lindsay gives her the inside scoop on ongoing murder investigations, and Cindy promises not to publish anything before Lindsay gives her approval.

The Women's Murder Club is their name for this group of four friends who meet sporadically to drink margaritas, solve relationship woes, and hunt down criminals. The group has many characteristics of a typical circle of girlfriends. In many ways, the dynamics of their relationships could be compared to their cosmopolitan counterparts in *Sex and the City*, but the *Women's Murder Club* is more concerned with catching criminals than buying shoes.

The lives of Cindy, Lindsay, Yuki, and Claire are endlessly intertwined and their success in the workplace relies heavily on one another.

BIOGRAPHY OF CINDY THOMAS

Cindy Thomas is a metro reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who works her way up to being a front-page, crime reporter. She's 30 years old in *1st to Die*⁹, and throughout the series her character develops into a more mature, polished, and investigative journalist.

Cindy is introduced wearing a black leather jacket, jeans, and sandals from Earthsake, a seemingly Birkenstock hippy pair of shoes.¹⁰ Cindy has blonde curls

that “bounce like mattress springs” and slight overlapping front teeth that make her “pretty features look even prettier.”¹¹

Cindy likes to read travel books and mystery novels¹² and is described as “city cool”¹³. Cindy majored in sociology at Michigan State before becoming a journalist.¹⁴ Having lost her father to leukemia at 13,¹⁵ Cindy will later bond with Lindsay who lost her mother at a young age as well and has been estranged from her father.

As the book series progresses, Cindy becomes better dressed and increasingly feminine, as she is often described as wearing pink clothing and designer labels, like a “Burberry trench coat.”¹⁶

Cindy is, “fresh in a pink wraparound dress under her coat, hair gleaming, looking as though she’d stepped from a department-store window.”¹⁷ Her youthful idealism and energy serve as a stark contrast to the harsh, dark and dangerous world of crime that Cindy works within.

“Very few girls older than eight could pull off rhinestone barrettes at the same time they were wearing pink, but Cindy somehow looked 100-percent delicious.”¹⁸ This description of femininity paints Cindy as a sweet sexpot, and as the novels progress

her love life becomes more important and an increasing number of references to her physical appearance are made.

“IF IT BLEEDS, IT LEADS”: CINDY THOMAS, CRIME REPORTER

Cindy Thomas is fast-talking, energetic, inquisitive, and pushy, many of the stereotypical traits associated with being a journalist. After two years working at the metro desk reporting on local “soft” news, Cindy has her eye on crime to advance her career.

The first novel in the *Women’s Murder Club* series, *1st to Die*, introduces Cindy as she arrives at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in San Francisco in search of a front-page story. Inside the hotel, a newlywed couple has been brutally murdered and Cindy wants to find out why. She relies on her wits and a few white lies to sneak past rows of police, detectives, and crime scene investigators to see the victims’ bodies firsthand.¹⁹

Cindy doesn’t let the gore or plethora of police stop her, because she realizes a murder this horrific could be the breakthrough story of her career.

*Cindy jumped in and the door closed. She couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe what she was doing. She pressed 30. The Mandarin Suite. A double homicide. Her story.*²⁰

1st to Die sets the tone for Thomas's personality in her professional and personal life. As a journalist, Thomas uses reporting tactics that would be considered highly unethical to some, but merely cunning, fearless feats of journalism to others. Lying about her identity as a journalist and crossing ethical boundaries is something Cindy does repeatedly throughout the series, but *1st to Die* balances this cutthroat image by introducing Cindy's softer side as well.

When Cindy finally makes it to the murder scene, she is almost sick at the sight of it.

*Cindy's legs buckled. She had never seen a murder victim before. She wanted to lean forward, to let her eyes memorize every detail, but her body wouldn't move.*²¹

Cindy's journalistic persona is tempered by her sensitivity, a quality not often recognized in male journalists. What may be considered an emotional weakness makes Cindy more realistic as a person and as a woman.

Cindy is portrayed as an "everyday" person, connected to her community at the street level as reporters are expected to be. Journalists wield great power and influence and should use these privileges to serve the public and keep a finger on the pulse of their beats.

In one novel, Cindy is covering a story about a group of counter-culture radicals who have been murdering wealthy, high-powered professionals. The radicals claim that these people represent the moral negligence of the entire country and that they won't stop killing until sweeping systemic changes are made.

When Cindy and Lindsay discuss this case, Lindsay is clueless as to what the radicals are fighting for. She is completely out of touch with reality, while Cindy knows of the group and may even have sources inside.

You wouldn't hear it. For God's sake, you're the police. You're a million miles away from these things, Lindsay. ²²

Besides being public servants, journalists have historically been portrayed as lovable alcoholics. In the old days, reporters would always keep a bottle of whiskey in their desk drawer or carry a flask in their coat pocket.

Journalists drank because of the pressures of the job, or to have a good time, or because they were hopeless alcoholics...It was their primary source of recreation and relaxation. ²³

This image is modified in the *Women's Murder Club* but still alluded to. Although Cindy doesn't often drink by herself or even with other journalists, she and the rest of the Murder Club typically unwind over a pitcher of margaritas and plantain chips at their regular spot, Susie's.

Cindy and the rest of the women lubricate the rough edges of their jobs and their personal lives with alcohol. Most of them have no family or husband to go home to either, so they have time to drink beers together at Susie's.

*Susie's Café is kind of a cross between Cheers and a tiki hut bar on a beach in St. Lucia. The food is spicy, the steel drums are live, the margaritas are world-class, and not only do the waitresses know our names, they know enough to leave us alone when we're into something.*²⁴

Cindy is the only journalist in the series who's given more than a few lines of dialogue and real character development. Cindy has an editor who surfaces in a few short scenes and when she's at the courthouse, Cindy is often surrounded by a mob of faceless reporters.

In one of the few times other reporters are mentioned they are described in a negative light and effectively accentuate Cindy's morality. This scene also makes a critical jab at the contemporary news media industry as a whole.

The scene takes place at a demonstration in Berkeley. The protesters are calm and controlled until their leader purposely agitates them into a violent frenzy. He does so to garner media coverage, and soon news vans are screeching around the corner to be first on the scene.

"A shame isn't it? Peaceful demonstrations never seem to make the news," a Berkeley professor and political radical says at the rally²⁵.

This poignant line of dialogue refers to the common journalism concept of, "If it bleeds, it leads," meaning that many news organizations favor tragedy and sensationalism over less visual, more important news.²⁶

Violence, gore and tragedy attract bigger audiences, higher ratings and can mean more profitability, so they are often given favored coverage.

The protest in *3rd Degree* was manipulated into chaos, and some news organizations responded but Cindy did not. Although there are logistical reasons for Cindy's absence, this absence points symbolically to Cindy's ethical character and distinguishes her from many of her journalistic peers.

CINDY THOMAS, P.I.

Cindy couldn't say she never looked for trouble. She worked the crime desk at the Chronicle and liked to say, 'Bad news is good news to me'.²⁷

All quality crime reporters investigate stories on their own; they use their own sources, discover their own angle, and only use police information to point them in the right direction. However, in *Women's Murder Club*, Cindy often oversteps her professional boundaries and begins to function more like a private investigator or police detective than a journalist. She toes the line of unbiased observer by actively inserting herself in the case and possibly influencing the outcome of the story.

In one novel, Cindy is trying to solve the murder of an unidentifiable homeless transient known only as Bagman Jesus. The police quickly give up their unsuccessful investigation, so Cindy conducts extensive interviews, hands-out bribes and burns a little shoe leather to discover the real identity of Jesus.

Cindy takes it upon herself to tell Jesus's family about their son's death, even though it is the police's job to inform the next of kin, and Cindy is putting herself in the middle of a volatile situation.

When Cindy breaks the news, she also promises Jesus's family that she will get some answers.²⁸

"You doing police work now, Cindy?" Officer Rich Conklin said after Cindy tells him what she'd done.

"Someone has to," Cindy replies.²⁹

In big cities like San Francisco, police can be overloaded with murder cases, leaving some victims to fall through the cracks. These victims may have no family or friends to lobby for their cause or hold the police accountable, so it becomes a reporter's job to take up these cases.

Reporters have access to expansive professional resources and powerful contacts, and can use these to seek justice for those who need it. Although Cindy may have acted inappropriately in the case of Bagman Jesus, she acts out of indignation to police indifference.

It is also the press's responsibility to work as a series of checks and balances for those in positions of power, including government organizations and law enforcement. Reporters should be watchdogs of justice and supporters of the

underdog, ensuring that even a city's overlooked and downtrodden are given a voice.

Much of *The Women's Murder Club* series is written from Lindsay Boxer's point of view. There are portions that Lindsay narrates, using the first person to describe a scene or her own emotions, and other times Lindsay provides the central narrative arc.

Lindsay's role as a homicide detective with the San Francisco Police Department sharply colors the description of Cindy and the other characters. As a police detective, Lindsay regularly deals with reporters and she is used to holding journalists at an arm's-length, restricting what information they have access to, and considering them more of an obstacle than an ally.

Although Cindy quickly becomes one of her best friends, Lindsay constantly tests Cindy's character and reliability. Lindsay admits she only trusts Cindy "99 percent" of the time.³⁰

It's hard to be friends with reporters when you're a cop. Their rationalized 'public's need to know' gives bad guys the heads-up and messes with the jury pools, Lindsay explained.³¹

Lindsay and Cindy meet in the women's restroom at a hotel in *1st to Die*, when they are both investigating the murder of a newlywed couple. Cindy follows Lindsay into

the bathroom hoping to squeeze some information out of her, but what transpires ultimately leads to a close personal friendship.

'You Okay?' Cindy finally inquired in a soft voice. The detective tensed up when she realized she wasn't alone. But she had this look on her face, as if she were on the verge of letting it all out. ³²

Cindy capitalizes on Lindsay's emotional instability to try to get close to the detective. Cindy's sensitivity and support are a sharp contrast to the ways in which men often use tactics like intimidation or threats to obtain information.

From that point on, Cindy consistently shows up at fresh crime scenes and tries to prove to Lindsay that she is an asset, not a liability. By befriending Lindsay, Cindy gains access to privileged, confidential police information and maintains a competitive edge over her competitors at the *Chronicle* and other outside reporters. Cindy's editor even tells her that finding an inside source is crucial to being a successful crime reporter.³³

Lindsay soon realizes that her relationship with Cindy is mutually beneficial, as Cindy's persistence and investigative skills help her solve seemingly impossible murder cases.

Her audacity and tenacity ticked me off enormously, but I came to respect those same qualities when her reporting helped me nail a vicious killer and send him to death row," Lindsay said. ³⁴

Lindsay and Cindy go from being professional partners to fiercely personal friends, and when Lindsay welcomes Cindy into her group of powerful, prestigious, crime-fighting women, the four quickly dub themselves the *Women's Murder Club*.

ETHICAL TRANSGRESSIONS

On one level, Cindy takes all the right steps to become a competitive reporter: she's being proactive with leads, forming valuable relationships with sources, and learning how to work the police department from the inside. However, Cindy soon sails past professional boundaries and becomes too close to her "inside source" Lindsay Boxer. Cindy loses perspective and objectivity, and her friendship with Lindsay could make it difficult to report critically on the police department.

Lindsay and Cindy's friendship leads to misunderstandings, confrontations, and power struggles. In *The 5th Horseman*, Lindsay tells Cindy about a murder she is working on but makes Cindy promise to keep the conversation private; they're speaking entirely "off the record."

When the content of their discussion ends up in print in the *Chronicle*, Lindsay thinks Cindy has undermined her authority and disregarded their agreement for secrecy.

'Cindy, what the hell?' Lindsay barked, almost shouted, over the phone. 'I asked you please not to do a story on Garza and you agreed!' ³⁵

Cindy claimed the story *The Chronicle* printed was based on her own investigations, and it was her prerogative as a journalist to use that information in a story.

*Look, you haven't given me anything on this story. It's mine. It's been mine from the beginning. And it's not right for you to come down on me for doing my job, Cindy said.*³⁶

The exchange of information between Cindy and Lindsay is a system of give-and-take. Although Lindsay is typically the one providing Cindy with crucial leads and informational access, Cindy saves the day on more than one occasion. Cindy uses *The Chronicle's* archive system, her ability to work sources and her network of journalists to sidestep legal barriers and sometimes, even solve the mystery first.

I can't give you anything, Cindy, Lindsay said.

I didn't ask you here to get something, Lindsay, Cindy said.

*Cindy, if you know something, tell me, Lindsay said.*³⁷

In addition to Cindy's intimate relationship with Lindsay, Cindy defies many standards of ethical reporting. According to The Society of Professional Journalists's "Code of Ethics", the essential ethical rulebook for all practicing journalists, bribery in journalism is unacceptable.

Journalists should be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news...³⁸

In *The 8th Confession*, Cindy literally and figuratively empties her purse in the pursuit of a reliable lead for a story. She gives potential sources cash, spare change, a penlight, lipstick, a barrette and even a tin of Altoids that she finds at the bottom of her bag.³⁹

For one especially promising source, a homeless woman named Flora Gold, Cindy gives a larger cash reward.

Cindy walked with Flora to the ATM on the corner, withdrew a hundred dollars, and gives 50 to Flora.⁴⁰

While the line between niceties and briberies is sometimes muddled, the bottom line in responsible journalism is that sources shouldn't be paid for information. Buying a source a cup of coffee or a meal, especially if that person is transient or impoverished, is typically acceptable, but distributing lump sums of money is not.

On top of bribery, Cindy often lies about her identity and misconstrues her intentions to gain access to crime scenes or garner trust from sources. In *1st to Die* Cindy lies to multiple hotel employees to gain access to a murder scene. She tells a security guard she's conducting business at the hotel restaurant and she claims to be a hotel guest to an inquisitive bellhop.

Although Cindy is soon discovered by police, kicked out of the hotel and has her press pass confiscated, she still ends up with an exclusive story – seemingly making all of her lies worth it.⁴¹

*All the other reporters were still piecing together the sparse details released by police. She was ahead so far. She was winning, and it felt great.*⁴²

Cindy's fearless and cunning reporting, no matter how questionable, is a quality many journalists aspire to.

Cindy's romantic life is virtually nonexistent in the *Women's Murder Club* novels. While the other three characters seem to be constantly plagued by man trouble, Cindy hardly ever dates and remains obviously quiet in their conversations about relationships. However, when Cindy does date someone, he is typically someone inappropriate and their relationship is riddled with complications. Often, this man is either a source or someone in the police department.

In *2nd Chance*, a little girl is killed in a shooting rampage in front of a church. When Cindy heads to the church to investigate, she is quickly smitten by the attractive, older, Reverend Aaron Winslow.

*Cindy spun and found herself facing a man with a smooth and very handsome face, kind eyes.*⁴³

Cindy continues to pursue Winslow, professionally at first, investigating the circumstances surrounding the murder, but then personally and romantically.

During a conversation over their mutual love of jazz, the reverend asks Cindy on a date.

Of course I know the Blue Door. I go there Saturday nights, whenever Carlos Reyes is in town. Maybe we could go sometime. As part of your story. You don't have to answer right now, the Reverend said.⁴⁴

Cindy was quick to accept, but even quicker to realize she was making an ethically questionable decision.

A half hour later, in her car, Cindy sat letting the engine run, almost too astonished to put it in gear. I don't believe what I just did... Lindsay would rap her in the head. Question whether her gadgets were properly working.⁴⁵

Cindy dramatically oversteps the boundaries of a reporter-source relationship and puts herself in a compromising position with a source she is still actively using. Although Cindy seems to genuinely like the reverend, this relationship recalls a stereotypical image of a woman reporter who seduces and sleeps with sources to get information.

This sentiment emerges again toward the end of the book series when Cindy begins dating Rich Conklin, who is not only a police detective but also Lindsay's partner on the force. In addition, Lindsay and Rich have a romantic past that Lindsay never fully recovered from, making Cindy's decision to date Rich morally questionable as a friend and a journalist.

Dating your best friend's ex definitely breaks the girl code, and dating a police officer who is often used as a source violates reporter standards.

Although it's clear that Cindy has real feelings for Rich, she does begin to use their sexual relationship to encourage Rich's cooperation and disclosure in their professional relationship.

In *The 9th Judgment*, Cindy arrives at the police department sniffing for leads on her newest case. Lindsay tells her they have no information to share and nothing new to report. So Cindy turns to Rich:

She batted her eyelashes at Conklin and gave him her best come-hither stare. 'Off the record, Cindy said. ⁴⁶

Conklin gave her exactly what she was looking for: a lead.

Cindy leaped up, hugged Conklin around the neck, kissed him on the mouth, and then flew out of the squad room. ⁴⁷

WOMEN'S MURDER CLUB: BEAUTIFIED AND SIMPLIFIED FOR TV

In 2007, *Women's Murder Club* was made into a television series that aired for one season on ABC. Each episode was one hour and after 13 episodes, the show ended in 2008.

During its brief run, however, the show accumulated a dedicated following, leading to a fan club and website devoted to saving the show from impending cancellation.⁴⁸

Women's Murder Club employs the basic premise of the book series but takes great liberties with the description of characters and narrative structure of the plot.

Aubrey Dollar plays pint-sized, firecracker reporter Cindy Thomas. In the novels, Cindy has blonde, curly hair, that's referenced multiple times throughout the series. In the TV show, Cindy has long, straight glossy red hair, which seems to be an attempt to differentiate her from the three other main characters.

Claire is African-American with dark hair, Jill is fair-skinned with a platinum blonde pixie cut, and Lindsay is a wavy-haired brunette. By making each woman appear drastically different from the others, it's easier for female viewers to pick one main character to relate to. The characters each have distinct personalities as well and their differences are much more accentuated in the TV show than in the book.

Claire is the older, mother figure, Lindsay is the damaged, rough-around-the edges leader, Jill is the workaholic, wannabe party girl, and Cindy is the young, naïve, go-getter who has something to prove.

Amplifying the beauty of the characters and creating a diverse cast of women helps attract a diverse audience, and because the show was broadcast on network television it had to appeal to a mass audience – aiming for high ratings and catering to desired demographics.

Although Cindy is described as attractive in the series, her femininity is accentuated in the TV show. Her lips are always perfectly coated in lip gloss and her thin, wireframe glasses are worn in select scenes to indicate when Cindy is knee-deep in a case. Cindy is petite but busty, and always proudly pinning her press badge to her blouse, which is typically unbuttoned by a seductive button or two.

Cindy is persistent, fast-talking and seemingly always put together for a journalist who is chasing down leads 24 hours a day.

When the Women's Murder Club meets, the women discuss life, love, loss, and their careers. The TV show glosses over many of the logistics of their professions to focus on the broad strokes of the women's friendship and appeal to a larger female demographic.

GIRL POWER! *WOMEN'S MURDER CLUB* PUTS FEMININTY FIRST

Women's Murder Club was classified as a "police procedural"⁴⁹ TV show, but its popularity lay in the feminine themes of this otherwise gruesome crime show. In the episode titled "Maybe Baby," a man is murdered and his 9-month-pregnant wife has gone missing. The authorities believe she's been kidnapped and that as soon as she gives birth, she will be murdered and her baby will be stolen. Cindy is completely baffled by the crime.

How could anybody want a baby so badly they'd kill for it? Cindy said.

God you're young, Lindsay responded with disgust.⁵⁰

Most of the Women's Murder Club members are in their thirties. Most have already lived through childbirth, miscarriages, cheating boyfriends, and tragic deaths. Cindy is the youngest member of the group, has never been married, doesn't have a boyfriend, and is just beginning to make headway in her career. Her relative immaturity compared to the rest of the club is often accentuated, and her emotional development as a woman seems to lag behind the others.

While the show broaches complex feminine themes like these, it is not without its conventions. Much like the quartet of superficial shoppers in *Sex and the City*, the Women's Murder Club can overcome personal differences with a little bit of female bonding. After only a few episodes, Cindy proves she is trustworthy and valuable to the other women and she is eventually accepted into their close-knit circle.

Sitting around a table at a late-night diner, the women share drinks, make jokes and speak honestly, leaving Cindy with a smile and the restaurant bill.

Cocktails, nicknames...does this mean I'm in the club? Cindy said.

CINDY ON SCREEN AND IN PRINT; IMAGE OF THE FEMALE JOURNALIST

Cindy Thomas on TV

Cindy often uses her sexuality and gender to pursue sources or gain access to restricted locations. In one episode, "Blind Dates and Bleeding Hearts," Cindy goes undercover and signs up for an online dating service, tricking her suspect into a date so she has a chance to ask him questions.

Cindy shows up at the restaurant in a tight, revealing top, complete with pouty lips and a heavy application of eye makeup.⁵¹ Cindy plays dumb for her date, pretending to be vulnerable, insecure, and lonely to keep him interested in her and talking loosely.

Do I scare you? Dino said.

Only because, Dino, I wanted, needed, you to like me... Cindy said.⁵²

Although this is all a carefully orchestrated act, it relegates Cindy into an old-fashioned stereotype of the female journalist as a sex symbol. Cindy is an extremely talented reporter, but she's still forced to fall back on an outdated convention, using physical seduction to further her career.

This concept of bedding sources is typical in portrayals of the female journalist, and is referred to in one critical analysis of women reporters in novels published in the late '80s and early '90s.

*Without her masculine attire, Adam's body becomes a playground for sexual innuendo and objectification.*⁵³

Adam's refers to Samantha Adams, a female reporter in a series of novels by Sarah Shankman. Adams, like Cindy in *Women's Murder Club*, typically wears slightly masculine clothing like slacks and blazers, to help garner respect and professionalism when working as a journalist. When Cindy goes undercover on her date, she drastically changes her appearance by wearing a tight, low-cut black shirt that reminds viewers she is feminine and sexy.

Throughout the television series, Cindy must repeatedly remind people that she is a crime reporter and deserves to be treated as such. Cindy is proud of her status, wears her press badge with honor, and even references the pepper spray and police scanner she inherited as a symbolic rite of passage.

"I am a crime reporter," Cindy explains, as she is led away from a triple homicide in *Train in Vain*.⁵⁴

Cindy adamantly clings to her "crime reporter" title to differentiate herself from a soft-news or feature writer, a reaction rooted in the 1920's term, *sob sister*. Sob sister was a name for early female journalists who were restricted to writing about social events and human-interest stories, stories that required an emotional, feminine touch.

*Slang dictionaries date the term to about 1925, defining a sob sister as 'a woman news reporter who appeals to readers' sympathies with her accounts of pathetic happenings.'*⁵⁵

Cindy distinguishes herself from this category by covering the goriest, most demanding news beat a city can have: crime. Cindy's commitment to covering crime reflects the common rejection of the "sob sister" stereotype by many contemporary women.

*Most women reporters resented this label because it reinforced the stereotype of women as big-hearted but soft-minded, emotionally generous but intellectually sloppy.*⁵⁶

Patterson's Cindy Thomas is a Modern-Day Blonde Bombshell

Historically, films, books, and television depict female reporters as a novelty. Men almost always outnumber women in the newsroom, and these men often oppress, ridicule, and dominate the women reporters. In Patterson's novels, male journalists are virtually nonexistent, and by removing male competitors from the narrative, Patterson allows Cindy to succeed professionally without posing any real male-female hurdles for her to overcome.

There are brief scenes in which Cindy interacts with other journalists, such as when she competes with colleagues for front-page stories, but overall, Cindy's biggest hurdle is her own sense-of-self as a woman.

Within popular culture, Cindy Thomas defies many stereotypes of female journalists while embodying others.

Cindy is a 20th-century reincarnation of the “blonde bombshell” journalist, made famous through many films of the ‘20s and ‘30s. Cindy’s blonde curls are referenced multiple times through the series, an image recalling fictional female reporters like Torchy Blane.

Blane was made famous in the 1930s through a series of popular reporter films, many of which even included the word “blonde” in the title.⁵⁷ *Blondes at Work* and *Smart Blonde* are two such films. Torchy appeared to be a symbol of progress for the image of the woman, but she was merely the old female stereotype in a different package.

*Her frenetic energy, rapid-fire repartee, and man-tailored suits may have suggested that she was the equal of any man, but the image was misleading. Torchy didn’t challenge the old notion of woman as the weaker sex; she just reproduced it in a more contemporary – and insidious – form.*⁵⁸

Cindy is initially described in print instead of displayed on film, and it’s easier for Patterson’s readers to overlook Cindy’s physical appearance and focus on her dialogue and intellect. Just based on the difference in mediums, Cindy is offered a better chance to overcome preconceptions and gender stereotypes.

Still, Patterson ensures that the reader doesn’t completely forget that Cindy is attractive. In *The 5th Horseman* Cindy is described as looking, “both boyish and girly” with her “fluffy blonde hair” and “man-tailored black suit jacket over a mauve

sweater and jeans.”⁵⁹ This effective combination of masculinity and femininity is what has shaped the image of female journalists for decades.

The newsroom has always been a boys’s club, dominated by men and dotted with peripheral women who work mostly as secretaries, starlets or love interests.

For a female journalist, this can create a hostile environment for their professional success. To compensate for their disadvantages, women reporters often go to extremes to get the story first. This can mean breaking laws, ignoring ethics of journalism, or putting themselves in danger.

This compulsion was evident in Torchy Blane films of the 1920s.

*Perpetually on the hunt for a scoop, she'd do whatever it took to get it -- eavesdropping, breaking and entering, going undercover, even allowing herself to be kidnapped. She was utterly fearless and focused...*⁶⁰

Cindy also prides herself on her independence and survival skills. In one novel, when Cindy investigates the death of the homeless man Bagman Jesus, she goes on a perilous tour of San Francisco’s underbelly. She embeds herself with the homeless, the drug addicts, the insane, and the dangerous.⁶¹

During an interview with a lawyer in the dicey Tenderloin district, Cindy is reminded of her vulnerability and mortality. When she’s wearing her proverbial journalist cloak, Cindy feels invincible and sage, but on the outside she’s still just a woman.

'You're a pretty girl in pretty clothes, walking around the Tenderloin alone asking who killed Bagman Jesus. Just suppose for a minute that you find his killer – and he turns on you?' the lawyer said. ⁶²

Cindy was taken aback.

The lawyer had called her a girl. Like she was one of his kids. He'd underestimated her tenacity, and he didn't get that she was a working journalist who covered crime. ⁶³

For the majority of the novels, Cindy's narrative revolves around her work and her relationship with Lindsay. Her love life is virtually nonexistent, and she seems completely comfortable with her romantic freedom. She shows no signs of pining for marriage or children, and maintains this independence through the first seven *Women's Murder Club* novels.

This makes Cindy an exception to the historical convention of romance and the fictional female journalist. As Howard Good mentions in *Girl Reporter; Gender, Journalism and the Movies*, when a woman reporter gets married or pregnant in a film, it typically signals her resignation and the end of her career.

Cindy seems adamant to avoid this fate and represents a new, progressive female journalist.

However, Cindy doesn't fit within the broad categorization of women at the other side of the spectrum, either. In contemporary books and novels, many single female journalists embrace a man's point of view when it comes to dating.

In Candace Bushnell's extremely popular novels and TV series, including *Sex and the City*, female protagonists are journalists, and many go to the opposite extreme of old-fashioned monogamy by becoming promiscuous.

The women appear less interested in finding true love, as they repeatedly claim, and would simply rather sleep with men to get sexual satisfaction. ⁶⁴

Cindy doesn't choose either of these sexual paths and remains wholeheartedly focused on her career; until she begins dating a San Francisco police detective.

Under the guise of police work and "off-the record" reporting, Cindy and handsome detective Rich Conklin meet for dinner at a Thai restaurant across the street from Cindy's apartment.⁶⁵ After some obvious flirting and superficial discussion of their current case, Cindy takes the evening an intimate step further.

I was just thinking. I'm not finished talking about this. I finally unpacked my cappuccino machine, Rich, Cindy said.

Conklin watched her twirl a curl around her finger. He smiled and said, "Are you inviting me over for coffee?" ⁶⁶

Although Cindy dating a police officer doesn't automatically break any ethical rules, doing so under the guise of reporting and then using Conklin to help further her story is morally questionable.

Cindy's misuse of power is common in the image of the female journalist, and is

often associated with a women's femininity or sexuality. In Kate White's novels dubbed *The Bailey Weggins Mysteries*,⁶⁷ Weggins is a divorced, female journalist who works at a glossy magazine by day and investigates murder mysteries at night. Overall, Weggins is an ethically sound journalist, but she still takes advantage of her powerful position.

*Perhaps the only negative facet of Bailey's character is that she uses journalism both as a cover for her sleuthing and for personal gain.*⁶⁸

Weggins agrees to cover a story in Miami so the newspaper will pay for her trip, and she offers to help a restaurant owner investigate his father's death so that she can get into his good graces for her own personal ends.⁶⁹

While Cindy may embody many traditional images of the female journalist, she breaks one of the most fundamental conventions of the image of the woman. Typically, women reporters are restricted in their personal lives by their dedication to a home and family life.

*"After work, the journalist/mother/wife cannot go to the local bar and grab a drink with the other male reporters because she, unlike her colleagues, has a second shift to get home to."*⁷⁰

This concept is a common restraint put on women, fictional and real, throughout history. No matter how successful women are in their careers or independent in

their lifestyles, women are often hindered with their maternal roles and expectations.

Cindy in the *Women's Murder Club* novels defies this concept by remaining single and showing no signs of yearning to become a mother. Even when Cindy dates Detective Conklin toward the end of the series, she continues to put herself and her girlfriends first. Cindy will meet the *Women's Murder Club* for dinner and drinks, and then see her boyfriend, showing a commitment to her independence and symbolizing a new progressive image of the woman journalist.

CONCLUSION

Although such entertainment media as film, television, and books often exaggerate aspects of real life for dramatic ends; they also inherently mirror societal expectations and mark the atmosphere of popular culture at the time.

In the 1930s and '40s, women were renegotiating their roles in the workplace, the home and, in journalism. Films were able to exaggerate these transitions and give female characters the license to be spunkier and more liberated than in the reality of daily life. Filmmakers began to realize the potential in featuring attractive, empowered, female reporters as protagonists, as in *His Girl Friday*.

Still, these seemingly modern fictional characters were shackled within the film's narrative and within the confines of audience expectations.

Male screenwriters, perhaps worried that the sob sisters were too independent and too feisty for the times, would make sure that by the final reel, these self-sufficient females would succumb to love, longing for what 1930s audiences were sure every woman really wanted – a man, marriage and children.⁷¹

James Patterson, however, created *Women's Murder Club* under 21st-century societal standards, and built his female protagonists accordingly. America has gone through sweeping ideological, political, and social reform over the past 50 years, and this allows the characters in *Women's Murder Club* to exist under a reformed set of gender rules.

According to a 2009 *New York Times* article, for the first time in history, women are representing nearly half of the American workforce, occupying 49.85 percent of jobs. Although the *Times* article mentions that part of this equality may be caused by the recession and its devastating impact on male employees, it also points to the undeniable progress of women in the workplace.⁷²

James Patterson molds Cindy, Lindsay, Yuki, and Claire to embody this contemporary idea of successful, professional, no-nonsense career women. All four women are trailblazers in high-powered, male-dominated fields. While this empowerment may not turn away male readers, it appeals specifically to a modern

female audience, who value equality and the possibility of professional success.

Cindy Thomas, a strong, beautiful, and confident young reporter, flourishes in Patterson's novels. She harnesses her feminine traits instead of falling victim to them. Cindy uses her sexuality to empower and embolden herself, reeling in sources with her unbuttoned blouse and bouncy blonde curls, and then quickly pouncing on the source's moment of weakness. Cindy capitalizes on the preconceived notion of women being weak and naïve, and uses this to her journalistic advantage.

Cindy as a character is not isolated from her female protagonist predecessors, but merely a reinterpretation of them. She manages to encompass the spitfire Torchy Blane and the fast-talking Hildy Johnson, without being shackled by their same, outdated fates.

Cindy's relationships with men are limited throughout the *Women's Murder Club* series. In the *San Francisco Chronicle* office and on her crime beat, Cindy is rarely in competition with male reporters, allowing her to flourish in her profession, unharnessed by the male-female dynamic. Cindy's personal life is nearly nonexistent through the first seven novels, with only sporadic mentions of her casual dating thrown into conversation between her, Lindsay, Yuki, and Claire.

By the 9th *Judgment*, Patterson's most recent *Women's Murder Club* novel, Cindy is embroiled in a steamy but serious relationship with police detective Rich Conklin,

and is even considering moving in with him. Cindy's rapid progression from single, professionally focused journalist to her serious relationship with Rich suggests that even Cindy, a 21st century woman, will eventually settle down with a man, a marriage, and a baby.

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APPENDIX

“Women’s Murder Club” by James Patterson

1st to Die: In the first novel of the *Women’s Murder Club* series, the foursome investigate the murders of newlywed couples throughout the bay area and beyond. Provides an introduction to each of the main characters in their personal and professional lives.

2nd Chance: In a rash of seemingly unrelated murders, the women must put the pieces together to solve the mystery of the Chimera Killer. A little girl is killed in the first scene, provoking an all-hands-on-deck response from the city’s law enforcement.

3rd Degree: When a killer vows to claim another victim every three days, the Murder Club goes into overdrive trying to find the killer. The murders become increasingly gruesome, from arson to poisoning, and Cindy is thrust in the middle of the investigation after she receives demands from the killer at her office email address.

4th of July: Det. Lindsay Boxer is shot in a stand-off, and put on trial for firing her gun and ultimately killing of her attackers. She vacations outside the city on her leave of absence, and finds herself face-to-face with a new string of murders. This novel focuses mostly on Lindsay, but she calls in a few important favors from Cindy at the newspaper.

5th Horseman: A killer is sneaking around the San Francisco Municipal Hospital, and murdering patients in their sleep. The killer leaves mysterious buttons on the victim’s eyelids; one such victim is even Yuki Castellano’s mom. The Murder Club is emotionally involved in this case as it involves a family member, and Cindy makes important discoveries based on her own reporting.

The 6th Target: A maniac aboard a San Francisco ferry opens fire, killing multiple people and seriously injuring medical examiner Claire Washburn. The murderer turns himself in but up against claims of insanity, the women must prove he knew what he was doing. At the same time, a rash of kidnappings focuses on the children of wealthy pillars of the community leaves the women clueless.

7th Heaven: Mysterious fires pop up all over San Francisco, with the victims left inside, bound, gagged and burned alive. The killers are leaving behind clues written in novels, and it is up to the Murder Club, the police and the arson investigator to put the pieces together.

The 8th Confession: The city's elite are being murdered one by one, with no signs of foul play or struggle. The Murder Club must work together to comb through newspaper archives, old case files, and suspect interviews to make the shocking discovery that the murderer is now part of a family legacy.

The 9th Judgment: This novel focuses on the Murder Club's burgeoning romantic lives and their relationships with one another. Cindy and Det. Rich Conklin are getting close, and discuss moving in together while Lindsay finally agrees to marry long-time beau Joe. In the midst of this, a killer targets Lindsay to be his confidante and liaison and Lindsay puts her life on the line multiple times to try to catch him.