



# The Nurse-Detective in American Movies

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**F**ifty years ago a unique nursing role, the nurse-detective, made a significant entry into American motion pictures, a medium that has profoundly influenced popular culture, values, and social customs across the nation.

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In numerous films made during the 1930s, viewers saw nurses pursuing murderers, gathering clues, and solving mysteries that baffled the police. Although more entertaining than factual, these films stimulated popular support for the nursing profession and allowed nurses to hold their own proudly with the screen portrayals of physicians, lawyers, clergymen, school teachers, and journalists [1].

The nurse-detective films of the 1930s reflected the increased realism in the depiction of crime on the screen. The popular Hollywood actresses of the decade

who played nurse-detectives were bolder and brassier than the actresses that had played the movie nurses of the 1920s. Starring as strong-willed, independent types were Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Blondell, Ann Sheridan, and Aline MacMahon, among others. Well over a dozen major films in the 1930s showed nurses solving crimes. Then the trend died down as quickly as it had arisen.

## Why Nurse-Detectives?

Why nurses as detectives? One obvious answer, of course, is that two of America's best-known mystery writers created nurse-detective characters in series of popular novels that were later turned into movies. Mary Roberts Rinehart, a nurse who had graduated from Shadyside Hospital in Pittsburgh and had gone on to become the number-one bestselling author of the century, had created the nurse-detective, "Miss Pinkerton." Another popular writer, Mignon Eberhart, made her nurse-sleuth, "Sarah Keate," the major character in most of her early novels. In addition, nurses — especially private duty nurses — fit neatly into the stylized genre of murder mysteries fondly known as "whodunits." Private duty nurses could observe all the members of a suspicious household; they could stay amongst the family day and night, as a policeman could not reasonably do. Nurses had access to drugs, hypodermic syringes, scalpels, and other such paraphernalia that could be used for murder, as well as make the nurse, herself, look suspect.

The nurse-detective films showed certain similarities in the circumstances of the murders: the isolated or restricted settings, the sinister atmospheres, the proliferation of suspects, the amount and kind of nursing care portrayed, and even the image of the nurse herself.

Four components seem basic to nearly all the films. First, the murder environment is controlled. The suspects and victims are claustrophobically contained either in an isolated building — usually a rambling, old Victorian mansion removed from the rest of civilization — or in a large hospital building with long, winding corridors and numerous locked exits and entrances. From such buildings there is no escape; within their walls there is no refuge.

Second, the investigation usually remains in the hands of only a few — the nurse, often a friend who is a real (that is, professional) detective, and a member of the victim's family. Occasionally, police enter the case, but, generally, they are too uninspired, too prejudiced, and too bungling to ferret out truth deeply buried beneath family or hospital intrigue.

Third, the suspects are numerous (half a dozen or so) and are identified at the outset. In the mystery formula, the circle of suspects, like the location, is carefully circumscribed; no outsider emerges at the last minute to enlarge the original number of suspects.

Fourth, solving the mystery is made even more difficult by an abundance of distracting and misleading bits of information. The suspects are all involved in some kind of intrigue, and they all jealously guard certain secrets that may or may not be relevant to the murders.

## Nurse Barbara Stanwyck Foils Evil Clark Gable



*Night Nurse.* Nurse Lora Hart (Barbara Stanwyck) confronts the conniving chauffeur, Nick (Clark Gable).  
Courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.

*In While the Patient Slept (on opposite page), Nurse Sarah Keate (Aline MacMahon) checks the condition of Detective Lance O'Leary's gun (Guy Kibbee).*  
Courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.

The first nurse-detective film, *Night Nurse* (1931), contained some of these common elements, but it did not conform completely to the "whodunit" formula that later became so popular. Directed by the famous William ("Wild Bill") Wellman, *Night Nurse* showed the influence both of his rough, sardonic style and of Warner Brothers' general penchant for muckraker exposés of the time. Based on the popular novel by Dora Macy, this film concentrates on more than uncovering the would-be murderer; it deals with nursing and medical ethics, as well as nurse training, circa 1930. It also takes a moralistic, satirical look at the decadence of the rich during the early depression era.

The first half of the film, set in New York City, shows idealistic but tough young Lora Hart (Barbara Stanwyck) going through a rigorous hospital nurse training program with her good but cynical roommate, Maloney (Joan Blondell). After receiving their diplomas, Lora and Maloney become private duty nurses and are assigned to the same case — as private duty night and

day nurses, respectively, for the two young daughters of a wealthy widow, Mrs. Richey (Charlotte Merriam).

Lora soon realizes that the little girls are starving on the milk-only diet prescribed for them by Mrs. Richey's corrupt private physician. Indeed, the whole household seems corrupt, including the alcoholic mother, her drunken boyfriend, and the conniving chauffeur, Nick (Clark Gable), all of whom are involved in a plot to starve the girls to death by keeping the mother continuously intoxicated. Once the children are dead, their trust fund will revert to the mother, who will be easy prey for this vicious group.

Nurse Hart meets with considerable opposition whenever she tries to do what she believes is right. Nick (uncharacteristically played by Gable) brutally knocks her out when she refuses to give Mrs. Richey a "stomach-wash" without doctor's orders. Corrupt Dr. Ranger (Rolfe Harolde) responds to Lora's report about her suspicions with insulting remarks about the "half-baked medical knowledge that you've picked up around the hospital;" and he threatens to have her put "out of the profession in short order" if she does not learn that "a successful nurse is one who keeps her mouth shut." Even kindly Dr. Bell (Charles Winninger), back at the hospital, at first refuses to get involved in suspecting another physician; but he finally agrees to support Lora's complaint if she can get firm evidence of the plot against the children.

Returning to the Richey home, Lora finds the younger child, Nanny, near death, and, although she finds proof of the criminal scheme, she cannot bring about a just resolution without help from Mortie (Ben Lyon), a charming bootlegger who had previously become enamored of her after she treated his gunshot wound in the emergency room at the hospital. She turns down his romantic advances because of his illegal dealings, but she gratefully accepts his help when he locates Dr. Bell for her and when he intervenes just in time to save her from being assaulted by the evil Nick, who has overheard her suspicions about him.

All ends happily, of course. Dr. Bell arrives and Lora gives her blood in a transfusion to keep little Nanny alive. Furthermore, he promises to report the unscrupulous Dr. Ranger. Mortie apparently arranges for some of his underworld friends to murder Nick, and then he gives up the lawless life for the sake of Lora, who now happily consents to date him.

While *Night Nurse* shows the nurse ferreting out the crime and helping justice to triumph, it is also seriously concerned with nursing itself, not just with the mystery. The first part of the movie portrays Lora's progress from her eager application to nursing school to her graduation three years later. She is shown carrying out various kinds of nursing activities — taking care of newborn babies in the maternity ward, assisting in surgery, and working with injured patients in the emergency clinic — where she is characterized as a joyful, compassionate,

competent nurse. Two other nurse characters present contrasting images and highlight Lora's courageous stand later when she finds herself in an ethical quandary on her first private duty case — believing that the physician is guilty of deliberate malpractice.

One contrasting nurse is Miss Dillon (Vera Lewis), the director of nursing at the hospital, who represents the old guard. She is thoroughly professional but too perfectionistic, inflexible, and subservient to the authority of physicians and established procedures. When a physician overturned her decision to reject Lora as a candidate for nursing school (because of her unfinished high school education), Miss Dillon immediately concurred, "Of course, doctor; anything you say, doctor." Consistently authoritarian, humorless, and unimaginative, Miss Dillon does all she can to bolster the hospital establishment for the good of the doctors.

Lora's roommate, Maloney, offers another kind of contrast, both in her attitude toward doctors and in her attitude toward nursing itself. She has no illusions about the perfection of physicians. Indeed, she tells Lora that interns are like cancer: "The disease is known, but not the cure." And later, it is Maloney who first tells Lora that there is "something screwy" about Dr. Ranger's treatment of Mrs. Richey's daughters. But unlike Lora, Maloney is not willing to risk her job (not to mention her life) by exposing the malpractice or disturbing the system in any way. "All a nurse has to do is to get into one jam and she's through. Fifty-six bucks a week may not be much, but it's 56 bucks!"

Maloney is a different kind of nurse — funny, cynical, but good-hearted — who takes it upon herself to initiate the young idealist into the hard truths of the world. She seems more motivated by money, and advises Lora to marry a rich patient. "Doctors," she says, "do not marry nurses; interns might, but then they'd only use their nurse-wives for cheap labor in their offices." Maloney assures Lora that she stays in nursing school because it is "the only job where they pay you to learn." Despite her hard-bitten exterior, Maloney seems to be an excellent nurse, and Lora cheerily discounts her cynical remarks about nursing, saying, "Oh, in your heart, you love it!"

Lora is representative of a number of heroines who appeared in 1930s movies, being both tough and compassionate, both worldly and altruistic. The conflicts that Lora faces lead her to define a nurse's role differently from both Miss Dillon's slavish obedience to, and Maloney's grudging acceptance of, the traditional ethics for nurses. When even kindly Dr. Bell tells her that interference with Dr. Ranger's treatment of the children would be professionally unethical, Lora shouts, "Ethics, ethics, ethics! That's all I've heard since I've been in this business. Isn't there any humanity in it? Aren't there any ethics about poor little babies being murdered?" By substituting for blind obedience the ethic of responsibility for maintaining the patient's life,



Lora becomes the undeniable heroine of the story — brave, loving, perceptive, and above all, triumphant. Dedicated, spunky, fun-loving, knowledgeable, and brave, Lora makes an admirable nursing figure.

### Rinehart's "Miss Pinkerton"

A more typical "whodunit," in both its plot and its heroines, is *Miss Pinkerton* (1932), a Warner Brothers film taken from Mary Roberts Rinehart's novel of the same name.

The film begins when the elderly Miss Juliet Mitchell (Elizabeth Patterson) suffers "nervous shock" upon discovering the body of her nephew, Herbert Wynn, shot to death, apparently by his own hand. Police Inspector Patten (George Brent), however, believes that Wynn has actually been murdered, and he requests that his friend Georgia Adams (Joan Blondell) be assigned to nurse Aunt Juliet. When the nurse arrives, Patten asks her to keep alert for suspicious events in the household and secretly assist him in discovering the murderer. In recognition of her new detective role, he affectionately dubs her "Miss Pinkerton." Such an assignment keeps Miss Adams busy, for everyone who inhabits or visits the house acts in a suspicious manner. People lurk behind doors and eavesdrop on others; mysterious figures enter the house at night, shoving or strangling anyone in their way; other characters sneak about seeking, planting, or destroying clues.

Almost everyone in the story becomes suspect: Miss Juliet's long-time servants, Hugo and Mary (married); Miss Juliet's lawyer, Arthur Glenn, and her doctor, Henry Stewart; Paula Brent, a young society girl who, it turns out, had been secretly married to the murdered Herbert; Florence Lenz, Mr. Glenn's secretary and also another girlfriend of the profligate Herbert; and Charles Elliot, a young society gentleman to whom Paula had been engaged before marrying Herbert. All of these characters come under suspicion of murder in the course of the plot, due either to jealousy or because they stand to benefit from Herbert's \$100,000 insurance policy. Even "Miss Pinkerton" herself becomes implicated when someone switches arsenic for the normal medication in a syringe meant for Miss Juliet, so that Miss Juliet quickly dies.

The next night, a masked, cloaked figure tries to kill "Miss Pinkerton" but runs away when Inspector Patten suddenly appears. The nurse herself never actually figures out who the murderer is, but her sleuthing supplies Inspector Patten with clues and accidentally causes the culprit to be discovered and captured. It turns out to be the lawyer, who is determined to eliminate everyone who stands between him and the \$100,000. "Miss Pinkerton," who initially complained about the boredom of hospital nursing, now decides she's had enough adventure and is ready to return to her normal duties. However, her personal life still pro-



Miss Pinkerton. Joan Blondell (playing Miss Pinkerton) supplies Chief Inspector Patten (George Brent) with the key evidence.

Courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.

mises some excitement, since she and Inspector Patten had become romantically involved during their collaboration on the murder case.

The view of nursing seen in *Miss Pinkerton* became a standard portrayal in the nurse-detective films that followed. The patient's ailment — "nervous shock," in this case — rarely required highly technical procedures or equipment. Bed rest, comfort measures, and occasional medications were the nursing care requirements. Of the various types of nursing actions, physical comforting was found to be more prevalent in nurse-detective motion pictures than in other films (Mann-Whitney  $U=635.5$ ,  $p < .00$ ). The nurse could provide this aspect of nursing care quite competently and still have plenty of time left for sleuthing.

Georgia Adams, "Miss Pinkerton," is portrayed as a vigorous, efficient, confident nurse, her humane sympathy spiced with sardonic humor. She takes care of Aunt Juliet carefully, straightening up her room, making her comfortable in her bed, bringing meals, and preparing medications. However, since Aunt Juliet sneaks out of bed at night to conceal some incriminating evidence, Miss Pinkerton keeps an eye on her, both as a suspect and as a patient.

Audiences were drawn by the film's advertisement, which promised "The greatest mystery-thriller of all time," based on the "Masterpiece of the world's most popular author," that "Mistress of mystery — Mary Roberts Rinehart." Again and again, posters invited the public to "Meet the screen's first sleuth in skirts," and "See a girl detective outsmart the smartest sleuths!"

The public liked this brave nurse-detective enough to make the novel a bestseller and to inspire a second ver-

sion of the movie by Warner Brothers nine years later, this time entitled *The Nurse's Secret*. Lee Patrick, a big-eyed blond like Joan Blondell, played the main role in this remake, but neither she nor the film had the charm of the predecessor. In both films, however, the character was much like the "Miss Pinkerton" who appeared in Mary Roberts Rinehart's novel: old enough to have substantial nursing experience; young enough to be a plausible romantic partner to the detective; compassionate and yet objective; conscientious and yet sardonically humorous about her duties; tough and courageous, but still vulnerable to normal human terrors.

## The Exploits of Nurse Sarah Keate

The faithfulness to an author's original characterization of a nurse-detective was also true of the movies made from Mignon Eberhart's popular mysteries. Eberhart's nurse heroine is a large, middle-aged, authoritative woman "who is stouter and crankier than she likes to admit" and who defines herself in rather stodgy terms:

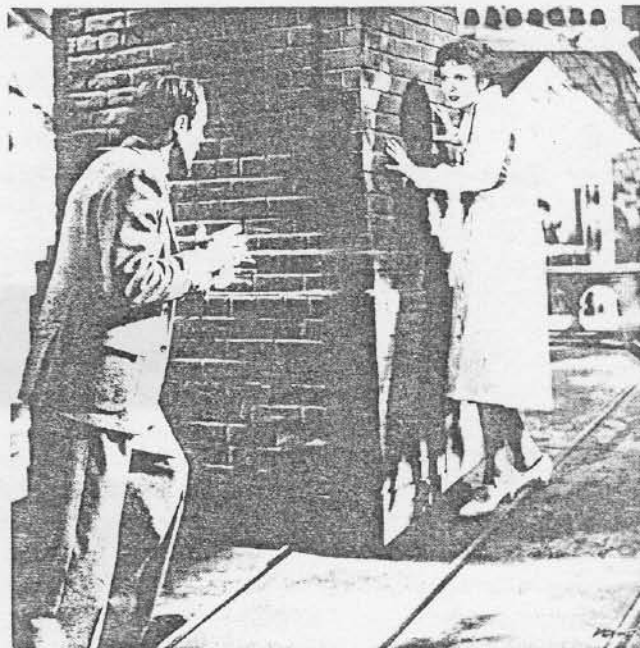
I am plain Sarah Keate, a spinster of uncertain age, unromantic tendencies, sharp eyesight, and an excellent stomach. I mention the last because it is really quite important: a good digestive apparatus and common sense walk hand-in-hand through life [2].

An unsentimental, brisk woman in a starched white uniform, she further describes herself as "a fool of an old maid," "inclined to neuralgia," and "having a white streak in my abundant reddish hair [and] lines about my eyes, which are not exactly pretty, perhaps, but have remarkably keen vision."

Sarah defines herself primarily as a nurse, saying:

I am not a detective, and I don't want to be a detective. Nursing is my profession. [But] there's no getting around it — there seems to have been a certain fate, a regrettable proximity, involving me and murders [3].

Although Nurse Keate occasionally solves the murder mysteries herself, she more often just supplies clues to a young, dapper detective, Lance O'Leary, who makes the necessary logical deductions. In the novels, Sarah Keate is at least fifteen years senior to O'Leary and has no romantic interest in him at all, though she is fond of him as a friend. Although this characterization as the redoubtable, matronly nurse-sleuth was sufficient to sell millions of novels, Hollywood felt the need for a more romantic heroine. Six films were made from Mignon Eberhart's novels; all but one of them involved Sarah in a romance, and most of them made her not only young, but beautiful besides.



Murder by an Aristocrat. Nurse Sarah Keate (Marguerite Churchill) seeks to elude one of the suspects on the roof of the mansion.

Courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.

The first of these films was *While the Patient Slept* (1935), where Nurse Sarah Keate (Aline MacMahon) goes to the large, gloomy home of millionaire Richard Federie, who has had a stroke. Avaricious relatives and associates soon arrive, each hoping to be favorably remembered in the rich man's will. Within a few days, Federie's oldest son, and then his butler, are murdered. The only link is that both knew that some secret was hidden in a small stone elephant that Federie kept on his mantle. Although sometimes endangering her own safety, Sarah vigorously pursues vital clues, which she passes on to Detective Lance O'Leary (Guy Kibbee). Almost everyone is a suspect, but O'Leary soon announces that the killer is the lawyer. The elephant contained Federie's statement that the lawyer was only managing his estate for a salary, but the lawyer was planning to claim that the entire estate had been willed over to him. The patient, who has been unconscious through most of the film, awakes just as the mystery is solved and asks if anything has happened. Actress Aline MacMahon plays Sarah Keate here as a youngish but very prim, austere nurse. She is intelligent, calm, brave, and compassionate, and, at the end, she is about to accept a marriage proposal from Lance O'Leary.

In the second film in the series, *Murder by an Aristocrat* (1936), Nurse Sarah Keate (Marguerite Churchill) is called to the Thatcher mansion to nurse Bayard Thatcher, who has a gunshot wound in his shoulder. Bayard has been trying to blackmail the rest of the family for \$25,000, and within days, he is shot through the heart. Everyone in the family has reason to wish Bayard

dead: dowager Adele, because Bayard demanded that she sell the family emeralds to pay him off; Hilary, because Bayard knew of his embezzling at the bank; David, because Bayard had cut off his drug supply; and David's wife, Janice, and John Tweed, because Bayard knew that they were having an affair. Singlehandedly, Sarah gathers clues and deduces that the murderer is Adele, who promptly dies of a heart attack.

In another 1936 film, *The Murder of Dr. Harrigan*, businessman Peter Melady plans to market a new anesthetic ("Slaepan") without giving credit to the doctors who helped develop it. He comes to Melady General Hospital, which he owns, to have surgery performed by Dr. Harrigan, one of the doctors that he cheated. The nurse, here renamed Sally Keating and made young and beautiful (Kay Linaker), finds Harrigan murdered in the elevator. Melady has disappeared and is later found, also murdered. Again, almost everyone looks suspicious to the police: Harrigan's wife, who hated him; the wife's lover; the ex-wife (Mary Astor), who feared that Harrigan would ruin her nursing career; Melady's daughter, who feared that Harrigan would let her father die on the operating table. Even Sally is suspected, because she brought the Slaepan formula to Melady and because she was seen sneaking Mrs. Harrigan's lover out of the hospital late one night. Sally's fiancé, intern George Lambert (Ricardo Cortez), wanting to exonerate her, pieces together enough evidence to solve the murder, though not before Sally has been attacked by the murderer (another intern who also worked on the Slaepan formula).

The next of this series to appear was *The Great Hospital Mystery* (1937), the only Eberhart film to show

the nurse-sleuth as she appears in the novel — middle-aged, graying, and overweight. She is called Miss Keats here and is played by the stoutly formidable Jane Darwell.

A romance develops between young nurse Ann Smith (Sally Blane) and a physician (Thomas Beck) in the Samaritan Hospital. Much confusion results when Ann tries to hide her brother from murderous gangsters by asking the morgue-keeper to report him dead. The morgue-keeper is found murdered, as is another man, at first thought to be Ann's brother. As usual, there is much sneaking around the hospital by Miss Keats, the gangsters, and the potential victims, while the famous comedienne Joan Davis provides comic relief with her slapstick rendition of Flossie, the awkward student nurse.

The fifth Sarah Keate film, *The Patient in Room 18*, was released in 1938. She is once more young and beautiful (played by Ann Sheridan), and her patient at Thatcher Hospital is dapper Lance O'Leary (Patric Knowles), who has had a nervous breakdown of sorts, brought on by his failure to solve a burglary case. He lands, of course, right in the middle of another mystery. Dr. Balman argues with Director Dr. Lethany against the hospital's purchase of \$100,000 worth of radium capsules for the exclusive use of Trustee Frank Warren. First Warren, then Lethany, then a hospital handyman, who said he witnessed the crime, are all found murdered in Room 18, and the radium capsules are stolen.

Again, suspects abound for one or more of the murders and the theft. Warren's nephew had just argued with him about his unpaid debts; intern Hajek is



*Mystery House.* Ann Sheridan again carried the Nurse Keate role in this hunting lodge murder mystery.

Courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.



*The Great Hospital Mystery.* Jane Darwell as nurse-sleuth Sarah Keats (right) confers with Nurse Ann Smith (Sally Blane) about the shooting of an already dead patient by a gangster.

Courtesy Twentieth Century-Fox Pictures.



having an affair with Lethany's wife, who tells him that she'd like him better if he had more money; handyman Higgins knows, from having heard the local gossip, how valuable the radium is; and O'Leary's manservant, Bentley, had a grudge against Warren, his former employer. Everyone appears in suspicious places at suspicious times, leaving traces behind. Lance O'Leary decides that the best medicine for his ailment would be to solve the mystery, which he does with Sarah's assistance.

In the last of these films, *Mystery House* (1938), banker Hubert Kingery invites the other bank officers for a weekend at his hunting lodge, where he informs them that he knows that one of them has been defrauding the bank through forgery and that he will reveal the name of the embezzler later. However, before that revelation can be made, Kingery is found shot in his locked room. The death is judged suicide, but Kingery's daughter, Gwen (Anne Nagel) doesn't believe it and later invites the same party to the lodge, with the addition of detective Lance O'Leary (Dick Purcell) and her old aunt's nurse, Sarah Keate (Ann Sheridan again). Once there, they are isolated by a heavy snowstorm. One officer's jealous wife threatens to tell "what really happened to Kingery," and she is soon found dead, another apparent suicide. One of the guests admits to Gwen that he knew Kingery had proof against one of his associates, and that guest dies of a gunshot wound as he locks his bedroom door that evening, though not before leaving a note that says, "The key is in my toupee." Again, Sarah and Lance together solve the crime.

Despite the variety of murders in these six films featuring Sarah Keate (by whatever name), they all display similar ingredients. Nearly all involve rich people, either in their gloomy mansions or as patients in private hospitals. Every murder investigation usually uncovers assorted adulteries and other vices along with the homicide. Nature always obliges the sense of mystery by whipping up an enormous storm. Nighttime or bad fuses provide the obligatory darkness in which Sarah can creep about in search of clues and in which she is usually attacked, typically by either being shoved about or locked in a closet. A generous serving of comedy assures the audience that the murders are not to be considered too seriously, and Sarah is usually the object of attention from the doctor or the detective. In the background, most often, is a foolish and obnoxious policeman who is totally incapable of solving the crime.

The image of the nurse-detective is remarkably similar in all six motion pictures, regardless of whether Sarah is young or middle-aged, pert or austere, an independent sleuth or dependent on a man for the final deductions. Sarah is depicted as an excellent nurse, although the patient rarely has a serious illness. She is intelligent, compassionate, energetic, and confident. She performs her duties with cheerful competence and

establishes a good rapport with even the most difficult of patients.

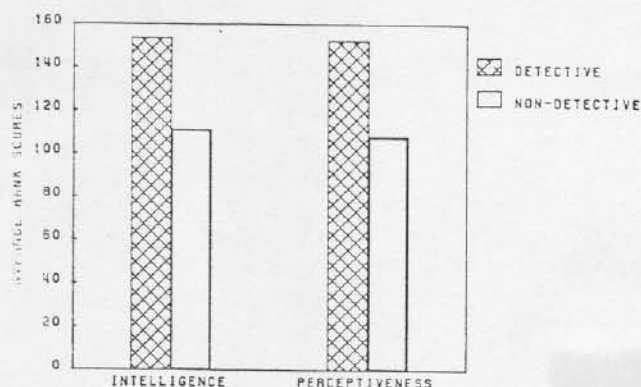
In the whodunits' mad atmosphere of corruption, murders, cover-ups, suspicion, and terror, Sarah is a welcome source of sanity, order, and integrity. Furthermore, she is usually the only character developed enough for the audience to identify with at all. And since, through her bravery and intelligence, she gathers the information with which to either solve the mystery herself or to enable the police detective to solve it, she is clearly meant to be a sympathetic character — the heroine, in fact. Sarah usually is better looking than any other character, she likes her work and does it well, she has unusual courage and common sense, and she is clearly on the side of law and justice.

## Cultural Influence

Viewed objectively, the 1930s nurse-detective image was enormously popular. The books sold millions of copies, and the movies pulled in enough money at the box office to convince filmmakers to continue to make nurse-detective films throughout the decade. What were people identifying with when they saw the films?

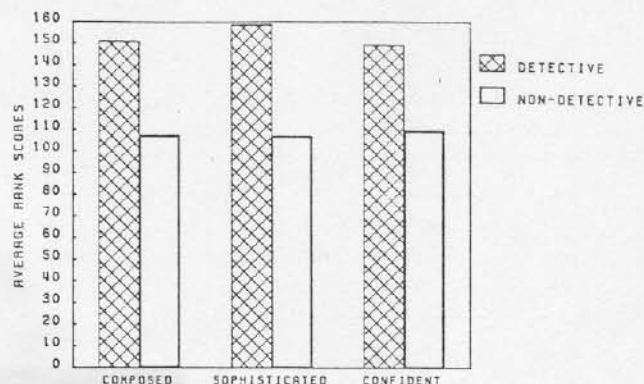
The public had already made the nurse-sleuth mystery novels of Mary Roberts Rinehart and Mignon Eberhart best-sellers. These nurse-detective whodunits exhibited many similarities to gothic novels, a tradition already long accepted. The film stories also played on Americans' general interest in crime and the mysterious world of sick rooms and hospitals. With these elements, bolstered by the widespread admiration of the nurse, it is hardly surprising that Hollywood considered the nurse-detective character an idea worth creating on screen and repeating over and over again. Once established, this film genre seemed to fit neatly into the psychological niche created by all those unrelated factors, and the nurse-detective remained popular until people and times changed enough to make her obsolete.

Quantitative results from content analysis support the fact that nurse-detective characters presented some of the most favorable images to appear in motion pictures over the past 50 years. Nurses in detective films saw their career as more important than did other nurse characters, they were shown more often in their professional role than otherwise, and they were central to the dramatizations (Mann-Whitney  $U = 687$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In terms of personal attributes, nurse-detectives were more intelligent, perceptive, confident, sophisticated, composed, tough, individualistic, and assertive than were the other nurse characters (Figures 1 to 3). Nurse-detectives were also more likely to take risks and to be less obedient and conforming (Figure 4). These nurses were also more powerful ( $t(216) = -2.31$ ,  $p < .02$ ). It is interesting that they valued sex (Mann-Whitney



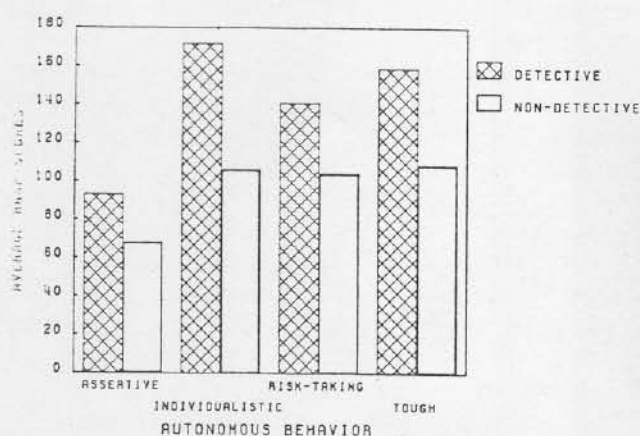
INTELLIGENCE: MANN-WHITNEY U=730.0, N=225, P<.02  
 PERCEPTIVENESS: MANN-WHITNEY U=679.5, N=219, P<.02

Figure 1. Intelligence and perceptiveness of nurses in detective versus nondetective films.



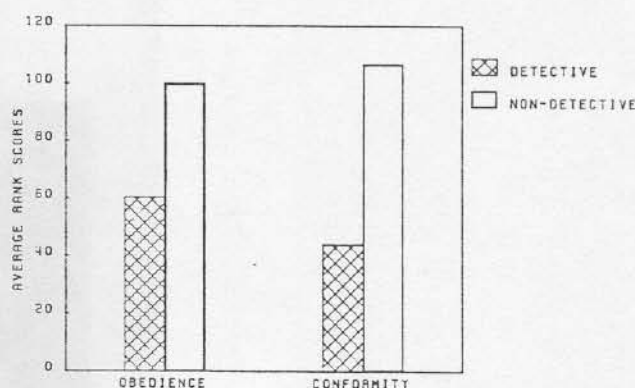
COMPOSED: MANN-WHITNEY U=680, N=218, P<.03  
 SOPHISTICATED: MANN-WHITNEY U=597.5, N=218, P<.005  
 CONFIDENT: MANN-WHITNEY U=744.5, N=222, P<.05

Figure 2. Self-assurance of nurses in detective versus nondetective films.



ASSERTIVE: T=1.917, DF=138, P<.08  
 INDIVIDUALISTIC: MANN-WHITNEY U=455, N=218, P<.001  
 RISK-TAKING: MANN-WHITNEY U=716, N=211, P<.04  
 TOUGH: MANN-WHITNEY U=630, N=221, P<.01

Figure 3. Autonomous behavior of nurses in detective versus nondetective films.



OBEEDIENCE: MANN-WHITNEY U=549.5, N=195, P<.02  
 CONFORMITY: MANN-WHITNEY U=351.0, N=207, P<.001

Figure 4. Obedience and conformity of nurses in detective versus nondetective films.

U=902,  $p < .06$ ), family (Mann-Whitney U=869,  $p < .04$ ), and sacrifice (Mann-Whitney U=869,  $p < .04$ ) less than did other nurses in motion pictures.

It is important to remember that the dominant general culture of the 1930s was composed of popular values that were highly supportive of the nursing profession. American motion pictures of that decade reflected this positive orientation toward nurses and reinforced and transmitted these values to American youth.

In nurse-detective films, nursing was associated with mystery, adventure, admiration, and success. Half a century later, the 1980s film image of the nurse has hit an all-time low, sinking far below that of any other professional group. The current, deficient image of nurses in relation to other professional groups translates into such real-world consequences as falling enrollments in schools of nursing, lack of support by the public of

hard-won nurse practice acts, and attempts to cut already inadequate nursing budgets.

## Notes

1. This study of nurse-detective characters in motion pictures is part of a larger investigation into the image of the nurse in motion pictures from 1930 to 1980. Content analysis was the research methodology used to analyze the films about nurses and nursing. Coders underwent a standardized training program. Interrater reliability was 91.6 percent, and intrarater reliability was 93.1 percent. For further information on the study methodology, see: B. Kalisch, P. Kalisch, and M. McHugh, "Content Analysis of Film Stereotypes of Nurses," *International Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 531-558.
2. Eberhart, M. G. *The Mystery of Hunting's End*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1930, p. 12.
3. Eberhart, M. G. *Murder By An Aristocrat*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1932, p. v.