

## Coming of age with girl detectives

Like her genre foremothers, the teen sleuth in *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* isn't just solving a crime, she's figuring out her place in the world.

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Emma Myers in *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (BBC)

After my sixth trip to the public library to get my ten-year-old “murder books” (aka young adult mysteries), I decided to dive into her obsession with her: we binged the whole of the new Netflix show *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (created by Poppy Cogan), an adaptation of a series of young adult novels by Holly Jackson. Seeing my daughter's avid fascination both with the main character—Pip Fitz-Amobi (Emma Myers), a good girl who is in over her head—and with the world of a murder mystery reminded me how formative the girl detective genre was in my life. It also made me grateful for all the ways the genre has evolved.

Even when a lot of other fiction was carefully regulated in my evangelical community, Agatha Christie, Nancy Drew, and Trixie Belden were generally considered old-fashioned enough to be harmless. I avidly read between the lines for information about scandalous adult life. (Nancy's relationship with her boyfriend, Ned, was never explicitly sexual, but neither was it a proper Christian courtship.) There were enough veiled (or not so veiled) references to sex, rape, negligent parents, abuse, embezzlement, adultery, and murder in all of these series to keep me thumbing the pages for more clues to a world that was often shrouded in mystery. I knew from half-overheard conversations and my own intuitions that there were layers of human life beyond the imperatives to obey your parents and rejoice in the Lord. Murder mysteries were one of my pathways to figure out what I suspected was being hidden from me.

The girl detective genre taps into this instinct even if you aren't growing up in evangelical culture. "Childhood is the land where nobody dies," wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay, and if you are fortunate enough not to have adulthood thrust upon you too soon, growing up is often a journey into the darker experiences of human nature. The girl detective genre makes their discovery an explicit part of the girl detective's growing up. *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* is a perfect embodiment of this generic ideal, because Pip isn't just solving a murder case, she is figuring out her own place in the world as she approaches young adulthood.

Five years earlier, when Pip was herself just a tween, Andie Bell (India Lillie Davies), a high school senior in her small English town, went missing, her body never found. A few days later, her long-term boyfriend, Sal Singh (Rahul Pattni), sent what seemed like a confession via text and then died by suicide. The police and the town have all accepted Sal's guilt, but Pip knew Sal as a neighbor and remembers his kindness and gentle spirit. She isn't convinced the case was properly investigated, so she decides to take it on as a senior project. She soon joins forces with Sal's younger brother Ravi (Zain Iqbal), who doesn't believe his brother's guilt either, and the two of them begin to pry into many secrets that are tangled up with the central mystery.

And wow, there are a lot of secrets to untangle in this small, closely knit town: wild underground parties (which made me fervently grateful my children do not have access to unoccupied woods), date rape, secret drug rings, abduction, abusive parents, sexual predation, anxiety, depression, adultery, racism, classism, and just plain sadness. No violence or sex is depicted explicitly, and many of these realities

are hinted at rather obliquely, which meant a lot of them went over my ten-year-old's head. I did regret that I had to explain what roofies are, since they are essential to the plot in several ways. I could see her inner world rearranging as she absorbed the essential life lesson "never leave your drink unattended." But she turned with renewed confidence and fascination as she watched Pip absorb that same lesson and keep going.

As Pip learns more about the secrets hiding in plain sight in her small town, her own life is not left untouched. People she loves have kept secrets from her. People she loves have been suffering under the weight of those secrets. Her quest to uncover the truth is also her journey to reconcile her girlish ideals with adult reality and to figure out how to keep her goodness when the world around is revealed as compromised.

In a lot of older girl detective fiction, the line between the dark world and the good girl is drawn very starkly. Nancy Drew is rich and smart, and there is never any hint that the criminal underworld could leave its grimy prints on her starched, white tennis skirt. Pip joins a newer tradition of girl detectives—*Veronica Mars* (created by Rob Thomas), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (created by Joss Whedon), and *Enola Holmes* (directed by Harry Bradbeer) among my very favorite—in which this line is fuzzier. The task of these girl detectives is to find their way forward as "good girls" in a world that reveals itself as darker and more complicated than their childish understanding could comprehend. But the genre is also a buffer from this darkness. The girl detective always solves the case, after all, and so much of the pleasure comes in watching all the complicated and confusing pieces fall into a pattern.

This is a powerful vision to shape the formative years of contemporary tween and teendom, and watching my daughter watch Pip made me realize how much I want that vision for her too—spaces to probe the edges of adulthood that also model the hope that she'll be able to figure it out. We'll probably have to wait at least another year for a new season of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, but thankfully there are many other girl detectives waiting for us. We can't wait to keep watching.