Mediating Girl Power: A Cognitive Approach to *Enola Holmes* on Page and Screen

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Abstract
Children’s mystery and detective fiction has often reflected cultural and societal changes, introducing the concept of “girl power” as early as the first half of the twentieth century. This article compares the “girl sleuth” narrative in Nancy Springer’s *The Case of the Missing Marquess* (2006) and the “super-sleuth” schema in the film adaptation *Enola Holmes* (2020). Relying on cognitive criticism, the analysis focuses on the conceptual properties of mystery and detective narratives as well as the strategies of detection employed by the girl sleuth to distinguish between the synchronous/inclusive models of empowerment found in children’s mysteries and the transient/exclusive ones in super-sleuth action-adventure adaptations. As a modern retelling of Sherlock Holmes mysteries, the Enola Holmes story transforms the central schema in the great detective script by depicting the neo-Victorian girl sleuth’s transgression into the public sphere and the attainment of the feminine ideal of girl power. However, in popular media culture, the synchronous models of empowerment are often replaced by transient models, which are characterized by hyper-transgressions, the objectification of knowledge and cognition, and the affective engagement of viewers. Accordingly, the super-sleuth schema is the product of media discourses of empowerment and hyper-textual practices that often forgo the integration of body, mind and context found in mystery and detective stories. By embodying the contemporary treatment of knowledge and power as ephemerally shared commodities, the super-sleuth does not let the viewer into the game to the same degree as the girl sleuth does, providing a less empowering experience for its intended audience.

Keywords Mystery and detective genre · Cognitive criticism · Mental models · Script · Schema · Adaptation

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In 2009, *The New York Times* reported that Nancy Drew and her blue roadster represented freedom, boldness, and intelligence for many female public figures who grew up in the era before the second feminist wave. The characters gave readers the impression that, as one of the interviewees shared, “you could go out, go anywhere, do anything and make a difference” (Hoffman, 2009). As early as the first half of the twentieth century, girl sleuths demonstrated the outstanding literary detectives’ qualities of “curiosity, stubbornness, cleverness and a talent for using the perfect piece of truth as a disguise” (Oppermann, 2018, p. 87). This can be related to the concept of “girl power,” a term that has been widely used in Western culture since the 1990s, indicating independence, confidence and empowerment among young women. Mystery and detective fiction has often reflected societal and cultural circumstances (see, for example, Stowe, 1986), and girl sleuth narratives can be viewed as cultural indicators of the dynamic relationship between knowledge and power. While the girl sleuth has been extensively discussed (Billman, 1986; Mason, 1995/1975; Dyer and Romalov, 1995; Zani, 2009; Oppermann, 2018), adaptations and new media have introduced the figure of the girl “super-sleuth,” which requires a new framework for approaching sleuthing and empowerment. While the girl sleuth works with what she knows, a super-sleuth has extraordinary skills and endless endurance.

Power is oftentimes represented differently when literary classics are adapted to contemporary action-adventure films. The popular practices of cross-genre adaptation, seen in Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit* (2012–2014) and screen adaptations of Sherlock Holmes (for example, Guy Ritchie’s 2009 film), have rendered famous literary protagonists as superheroes or, in the case of famous detectives, super-sleuths. Such re-appropriations into the action-adventure genre undoubtedly produce different mental models in viewers’ minds. I acknowledge the necessity for textual infidelity between a book and its screen adaptation (see Hutcheon, 2013/2006; Stam, 2007; Carroll, 2009) and the cultural impact of screen adaptations of children’s books (McCallum, 2018), as well as analytical approaches to form and content in children’s adaptations (Meeusen, 2020). However, the adaptation of the girl super-sleuth narrative to fit the action-adventure genre raises issues because it changes the models of empowerment. Whereas the synchronous models in classic girl sleuth mysteries include the reader as part of the detective game, the transient models of super-sleuth narratives use argument by assertion and by excessively verbalizing empowerment. The super-sleuth does not let readers/viewers into the game in the same way that the girl sleuth does, which results in a possibly less empowering experience for the recipients.

My study focuses on the rewriting of “a contemporary model of girl power” (Fritz, 2012, p. 51) in the first book in Nancy Springer’s Enola Holmes Mystery Series, *The Case of the Missing Marquess* (2006), and its subsequent film adaptation *Enola Holmes* (2020). Both the book, which is a spin-off of Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic Sherlock Holmes mysteries, and its adaptation are commercially successful. They address girl power in starkly different ways, as I will demonstrate by applying a cross-disciplinary approach which draws on cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics. Although cognitive approaches have already led to valuable insights into the ideology, adaptations, genres and topics of children’s literature (Stephens, 2011; Nikolajeva, 2014; Stephens and Geerts, 2014; Kokkola and Van den Bossche,
the conceptual models that are characteristic of children’s mystery and detective fiction have not yet been examined with a cognitive methodology. Placing mystery and detective narratives under a cognitive lens can reveal dynamic relationships between knowledge and consumer empowerment. Additionally, as children’s stories in the twenty-first century cross the boundaries of genre, format and age, cognitive criticism responds well to the emergent need for cross-disciplinary approaches (see Martin, 2009; Nikolajeva, 2014; Kérchy and Sundmark, 2020). According to Maria Nikolajeva (2014, p. 4), cognitive criticism “deals with the means with which various kinds of human knowledge, from factual knowledge to ideology, can be expressed through artistic language.” Moreover, since cognitive approaches to children’s fiction have allowed for both a “renewed attention to readers” (Kokkola and Van den Bossche, 2019a, b, p. 358) and “a specific potential for responding to social reality” (Stephens, 2011, p. 12), they can reveal the underlying conceptual properties of children’s texts, thus challenging some of the common assumptions about the production and reception of children’s literature. Frauke Pauwels (2019, p. 432) stresses that a cognitive approach “allows us to investigate literary texts and literary reading as firmly entangled with other elements of human culture” and urges us to “explore what groups are created within texts, what the implied conditions for membership are, and how group boundaries can be crossed” (p. 438). Following Pauwels’s propositions, abstract and representational knowledge, which is the focus of both nonfiction and detective fiction, is viewed as power, and in both cases enables the rearranging of social positions.

The “Master Detective Script”

John G. Cawelti (1976) provides three elements of a satisfying mystery narrative: mystery, inquiry and revelation. Such a narrative structure can also be viewed as a script, and in the context of adult mystery and detective narratives as the “great detective script.” A script is “a dynamic element, which expresses how a sequence of events or actions is expected to unfold” (Stephens, 2011, p. 14). According to John Stephens, readers do not need every part of the script to understand it. Upon recognizing the initial component, they tend to anticipate on what follows and take pleasure in what Mark Turner (1996, p. 20) refers to as “narrative imagining,” or seeing “how the text expands the script by completing or varying the expected pattern” (Stephens, 2011, p. 15). Mystery and detective narratives actively engage readers to connect clues, make assumptions, and draw conclusions. Nikolajeva claims that the mystery genre is the perfect “field for mind-reading in fiction.” It is based on “paralipsis” or the “omission of essential information that is hidden from the character or the reader or both,” which “demands putting together puzzle bits acquired from various sources” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 161). Cognitive criticism attempts to recognize “patterns and principles across readers and texts” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 2). The process of detection is thus driven by the missing knowledge, or the idea of “not having” (Raskin 2004, p. 36), and the reader’s active participation facilitates “the return to the body” that is the foundation of human cognition (Kokkola and Van den Bossche, 2019a, b, p. 358).
In children’s detective fiction, the characters’ drive to solve a mystery by filling cognitive gaps has also prompted the transgression of boundaries of space, age, gender, role and status. This enables young sleuths to assume non-traditional roles, particularly outside the realm of childhood. While Christopher Routledge (2001, p. 64) claims that in children’s detective stories “the discourse of adulthood attempts to overwhelm and eradicate the discourse of childhood,” I would argue that the mystery—inquiry—revelation script in children’s literature includes access to dominant discourses and forms of power. I will refer to the children’s detective script as the “master detective script” after Astrid Lindgren’s classic *Master Detective: A Kalle Blomkvist Mystery* (1946), which adeptly reflects the child sleuth’s and reader’s imaginary acquisition of status and power in children’s detective fiction.

Children’s mystery and detective novels use containment and the transgression of boundaries to create a sense of play and freedom as well as to provide protection within the imaginative spaces of childhood. Mark Johnson described the schema of containment as a structure “for organizing our experience and comprehension” (1987, p. 29) and “one of the most pervasive features of our bodily experience” (p. 21). Johnson explains that from early on we perceive our bodies as containers and experience physical containment in our surroundings, such as moving in and out of rooms and manipulating objects (p. 21). The manifestations of the containment schema are visible in our daily actions as well as in expressions that we use at the literal and metaphorical levels, from “John went out of the room” to “Pick out the best theory” (p. 32). The visual representation of the containment schema is a circle with a boundary (p. 23), separating the space into its “interior” and “exterior.” The boundary can be transgressed on a trajectory in and out of the circle (p. 32). The term “sleuth” derives from Middle English, meaning “a track, or path” (Zani, 2009, p. 51). It corresponds to the visual representation of the containment image schema and the transgression of its boundary along a path (Johnson, 1987, pp. 32–33). Findings in cognitive linguistics, neurosciences and psychology have shown that the “brain-environment interaction is inherently embodied” and that “language forms a bridge between the body and the world” (Kokkola and Van den Bossche, 2019a, b, p. 356). The progressive path of the child sleuth positions the investigating body in their surroundings, and their inquiry instigates movement through experientially rich spaces. This pattern allows for a variety of cognitive strategies. Although movement within the conceptual container is possible on the in and out trajectory, the boundary can also function as a protection from outside forces (Johnson, 1987, p. 22). Therefore, the experience of containment and transgressing boundaries has allowed both for what David Rudd describes as the construction of a safe realm for children’s imagination (2000, p. 204), and the imagined transgressions into the public sphere. An example is Emil’s tour of the city of Berlin in Erich Kästner’s *Emil and the Detectives* (1929), which is prompted by Emil’s money being stolen. Child sleuths and their readers are pulled out of their comfort zone to spark the imagination and the development of cognition. The narratives draw on concepts characteristic of early childhood exploration and play, such as using objects as containers, moving in and out of familiar and unfamiliar spaces, finding answers to life’s mysteries and understanding the world and one’s place in it. In addition, Roberta Seelinger Trites (2014, pp. 22–27) has detected the ubiquity of the embodied conceptual
metaphors **up** is **good** and **growth** is a **journey** in Young Adult literature, which indicates that containment and transgression are deeply related to the concepts of **being** and **becoming**. The interest in these transgressions is amplified by the pending independence of young adulthood and its socio-cultural and risk-taking aspects.

Children's mysteries are traditionally looked down upon for their stylistic simplicity, mass production, lengthy serial structure, formulaic mystery plots, ghost writing or aesthetic deficiency. Nevertheless, they “often feature provocative narratives, with complex, active children, as well as challenging critiques of how we view childhood and power” (McGee, 2004, p. 5). Building on the popular great detective script (mystery—inquiry—revelation), the children’s master detective script (mystery—transgression—inquiry/exploration—revelation) set a standard for stories in which marginalized children, who were deemed cognitively and socially inferior, could triumph against overwhelmingly superior adults. As Routledge (2001, p. 64) has observed, this makes children’s mystery and detective fiction the site of clashing ideologies and a “radical discourse” of childhood: “child detectives often pose a challenge to adult hierarchical structures” by attending to “things overlooked by, or invisible to, the adult gaze.”

**The “Girl Sleuth” Schema**

Crossing boundaries in detective stories does not only refer to those that separate childhood and adulthood, but to any realm that is out of reach. An example is the “girl sleuth” schema. Like image schemas to which linguists refer in the context of early childhood, narrative schemas are parts of dynamic narrative scripts. According to Stephens, schemas shape our knowledge of objects, situations, genres and cultural forms and ideologies. Within the detective script, a detective “whose existence is a mere function of the mystery [s]he is solving” (Grossvogel, 1979, p. 15) often inadvertently and entertainingly transgresses into the realm of heroism, authority and empowerment. While Eva Oppermann characterises the detective as “the readers’ representative” (2018, p. 85), I see the reader as the detective’s companion. Although Stephens defines scripts as dynamic and schemas as static, I propose that the sleuth schema of the mystery narrative is dynamic: it is influenced by the underlying conceptualization of containment and crossing boundaries in which the mystery is the driving force moving the subject and the recipient of the narrative forward. Consequently, the girl sleuth schema disrupts the great detective schema on several levels. The character of the privileged and cognitively superior great detective, like Sherlock Holmes, is in the girl sleuth narrative often subverted from the marginalised positions of both childhood and girlhood. This transformation of schemas and scripts has opened up possibilities for the expansion of gender norms that enabled girl sleuths like Nancy Drew to collect clues, while also fixing flat tires, administering first aid, repairing motorboats, adeptly driving through thunderstorms, and conducting psychological assessments (Keene 2000/1930). My cognitive analysis of the modern girl sleuth in *The Case of the Missing Marquess* relates the *Enola Holmes* master detective script to its Sherlock Holmes pretext. I will consider the underlying concepts, metaphorical projections and cognitive strategies associated with the girl sleuth schema in order to detect the specific models
of empowerment that are key to understanding the girl sleuth, super-sleuth and the concept of girl power in the changing social and media landscapes of the early twenty-first century.

**The Case of the Missing Marquess and Synchronous Models of Empowerment**

Nancy Springer’s popular Enola Holmes Mystery Series (2006–2010), a neo-Victorian retelling of the classic Sherlock Holmes mysteries for young readers, showcases containment and transgression of boundaries across historical, ideological, artistic and familial spaces. Enola Holmes has already been framed as “a specimen of one of the feminine ideals that can be found in girl power” (Fritz, 2012, p. 48). She is Sherlock Holmes’s considerably younger sister, who is in her estranged brother’s eyes “a girl of minimal cranial capacity” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 47). Compared to the great Sherlock Holmes, whom Dr. Watson describes as a “scholar, chemist, superb violinist, expert marksman, swordsman, singlestick fighter, pugilist, and brilliant deductive thinker” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 23), Enola’s mental list of her own accomplishments includes being able to “read, write, and do sums; find birds’ nests; dig worms and catch fish; and […] ride a bicycle” (p. 24). Springer’s popular novels relate Virginia Woolf’s proposition of imagining “what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister” (2014, p. 44) to Sherlock Holmes. Due to a large number of fairy tale retellings, particularly “feminist revisions using postmodernist strategies or playful deconstruction” (Stephens and Geerts, 2014, p. 193), the 1990s witnessed an increased interest in retellings and adaptations (Stephens and McCallum, 1988), which featured a variety of literary strategies as well as entanglements with multimodal and cross-media forms. Springer’s text reshapes the Sherlock Holmes stories and the detective genre “in the light of contemporary reinterpretations” (Stephens, 2009, p. 92). The synchronous models of empowerment in the series manifest themselves most obviously in the use of conceptual metaphors and the cognitive strategies of conceptual blending and the imagination.

In *The Case of the Missing Marquess*, Enola tells most of her own story. This technique of homodiegetic narration puts the reader in the role of the detective’s companion who has access to the girl sleuth’s perspective, participates in the inquiry, yet knows only as much as she does. At the beginning of Enola’s narrative, we learn that her name “backwards, spells alone” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 4), and that her mother disappeared on her fourteenth birthday. Prompted by this mystery, the reader can explore various private and public spaces through the eyes of the main character. Conceptual metaphor theory helps to understand this. Research in cognitive linguistics has demonstrated that as an abstract concept, knowledge can only be comprehended by means of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993; Kövecses, 2010). Sherlock Holmes’ method is based on the power of seeing, and especially observing (“my eyes tell me”; Doyle, 2016/1892, pp. 3–4), that is: knowing is seeing. By contrast, Enola uses personification metaphors (Bratianu, 2015, p.

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1 Only the prologue and epilogue are delivered by the omniscient third-person narrator.
to understand knowledge and thinking processes: “Everything seemed to turn upside down in my mind, as if it were swinging by its knees from a tree limb” (p. 38), or “my thoughts running wild with excitement” (p. 94). These are related to the metaphor **mind is the body**. According to George Lakoff, poetic metaphors are frequently an extension of our pervasive, conventional system of metaphorical thought (1993, p. 246). In this case, the source domain of a person is mapped onto the target domain of knowledge and thought, which suggests that abstract concepts are perceived as personal entities with which one can have a relationship. Although their approach is different, both Enola and Sherlock use the same group of cross-linguistic conceptual metaphors (**mind-is-body**) (Sweetser, 1990) to comprehend knowledge and thought as subjective and integral to their embodied experience.

Several types of cognitive processing are present in the novel: the underlying acquisition of independence, confidence and empowerment of the main protagonist, resulting in the development of synchronous mental modelling. The mystery of her mother’s disappearance prompts Enola to enter her mother’s room. They had not been very intimate before because “Mother and I seldom interfered in one another’s concerns” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 5). As Enola’s explores the room, she finds new meaning in Mother’s birthday presents to her: they help her to read her mother’s messages and teach her to appreciate her mother’s creativity and resourcefulness. These presents include “a drawing kit […]; a stout book entitled *The Meanings of Flowers* […]; a much smaller book of ciphers” (p. 5). Thanks to these gifts, Enola is able to decode her mother’s first message “ALO NEK OOL NIY MSM UME HTN ASY RHC” as “ENOLA LOOK IN MY CHRYSANTHEMUMS” (pp. 58–59). The key to the room full of secret containers, such as her mother’s flower painting or her bed knobs, becomes Enola’s “most precious possession” (p. 50). Born “indecisively late in Mother’s life, a scandal, a burden” (p. 8), Enola, who is presumably not destined for either affection or greatness, becomes privy to her mother’s “sanctuary of the artistic spirit” (p. 15). However, the disarray that Eudoria Vernet Holmes left in her bedroom is subject to differing interpretations. Whereas Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes read it as a sign that she may “have progressed from oddness to senile dementia” (p. 12), to Enola it becomes a resource of valuable clues, such as a discarded dress improver, hidden money, or the “tipstails” cipher. The ciphers and clues exercise her metalinguistic awareness and divergent thinking, while the hidden money gives her freedom, independence and the power of choice. When discussing narrative schemas, Stephens (2011, p. 15) claims that “the recurrence or addition of further components enables the schema to be modified for socially transformative purposes.” While Sherlock Holmes is characterized as “the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen,” here his lack of “softer passions” (Doyle, 2016/1892, p. 1) results in the subversion of the great detective schema. His power of seeing and observing is effective only in public and non-familial spaces. As a Victorian girl, Enola belongs in the private sphere, which is what helps her decipher the clues.

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2 Springer provides the “tipstails” cipher solution at the end of the novel: “The first line of letters is ‘ivy tips,’ the second line ‘ivy tails.’” One is supposed to follow the letters “up and down between the lines […] separating the result into words” (p. 167).
Enola’s transgression into public spaces is enabled by Victorian garments that are generally thought to be confining and restrictive, representing containment both in the literal and metaphorical sense. In her discussion of corsetry in neo-Victorian Young Adult literature, Amy L. Montz (2019, p. 92) describes the corset as “uniquely situated in the history of women’s clothing, particularly during the Victorian era: it is both public and private, masculine and feminine, utilitarian and ornamental, necessary and reviled.” Neo-Victorian texts which are “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilman and Llewellyn, 2010, p. 4) often rewrite the corset for the purpose of the forward-thinking as well as rebellious practices of neo-Victorian heroines. The Enola Holmes series likewise reconstructs the corset for the purpose of storage, masquerade and protection. Enola’s suspicions about her mother leaving with “a mannish umbrella, a mannish hat, yet swishing that most flirtatious feminine tail, a bustle” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 19) inspire her own subversion, where instead of “various and proper regulators, enhancers and improvers” she wears “cloth containers—baggage, in effect—filled with unmentionables wrapped around bundles of bank notes” (p. 75). By turning a corset designed to “exercise self-restraint” (p. 52) into a more subversive type of container, Enola engages in carnivalesque acts of non-conformity (Stephens, 1992, p. 121) and disguise. Similar to her brother Sherlock, of whom Dr. Watson reports that “[t]he stage lost a fine actor, even as science lost an acute reasoner, when he became a specialist in crime” (Doyle, 2016/1892, p. 17), Enola uses role-play to escape her home and boarding school on her mission to find Mother. Aware that everyone would expect her to disguise as a boy, Enola chooses to become “the last thing my brothers would think I could, having met me as a plain beanpole of a child in a frock that barely covered my knees. I would disguise myself as a grown woman” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 76). By altering her appearance and changing the function of the Victorian corset to the point of ridicule, Enola demonstrates the mind’s capacity for conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002; Stephens and Geerts, 2014) or combining different input spaces to produce new structures. This type of resourcefulness enables Enola to transgress into public spaces (the city of London), using the symbol of “propriety, constraint, and femininity” (Montz, 2019, p. 89) as a container for protection from outside forces.

Enola’s resourcefulness is also evident in her investigative method as part of the master detective script. She works on two different cases: the disappearance of her mother and the possible kidnapping of Viscount Tewksbury, Marquess of Basilwether. To explain why her mother has gone missing, Enola compiles a list of questions, earning recognition from Sherlock Holmes (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 45). By planting ciphers in her Mother’s favourite periodicals, such as the Pall Mall Gazette (p. 160), Enola can get in touch with her and eventually receives a message back, from which she deduces that Mother is wandering freely with the Gypsies and “has done the best she can for her late-in-life daughter” (p. 166). In the other inquiry, Enola performs a close inspection of Tewksbury’s “platform in the tree” (p. 97) where he “would go to be alone” (p. 92). Clues that she finds in clothes, hair and pictures reveal to her that Tewksbury left his position in life in favour of going “to sea on a boat” (p. 101). By regarding knowledge as a personal entity that she acquaints through careful observation of private spaces, Enola draws on the clues...
that reveal the young viscount’s disappearance as voluntary, quite personal, and very similar to her own. About his clothes, she remarks: “Made to wear velvet and lace. Almost as bad as a steel-ribbed corset” (p. 100). The revelation in the Tewksbury case requires the evocation of rich imagery and conceptual blending. Here Enola produces a drawing “without conscious memory, without thought, the pencil strokes coming swiftly to hand from some source deep within [her] mind” (p. 151). She can identify the perpetrator in disguise posing as two different people by using her imagination, or the “ability to conjure up images, ideas, impressions, intentions and the like” (Abraham, 2020, p. 1).

Moreover, by creating new inferences to transition from private into public spaces, Enola demonstrates various stages of being and becoming, and uses her imagination to re-invent herself as two different professionals, “the great Dr. Leslie T. Ragostin, Scientific Perditorian,” and his secretary, Ivy Meshle, “a plain young woman, unremarkable except for her efficiency” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 164). After successfully solving her first case, Enola’s cognitive strategies enable her to find her place in the world by expanding and subverting traditional concepts. Thus, by using cognitive strategies, Enola Holmes achieves what was virtually impossible for women and girls at the time—she becomes a professional detective on a par with her famous brother Sherlock. By reconstructing traditional schemas, interrogating the official culture and conceptually blending existing concepts, the girl sleuth script in Springer’s novel bases girl power on cognitive resourcefulness and new emergent structures. The conceptual modelling presented throughout the narrative imparts on the reader the mental and narrative model of the great detective’s sister, who would have done “very well on her own” (Springer, 2020/2006, p. 35). It also presents a kind of girl power that positions “young women as creators of their own destinies and life chances” (Harris, 2004, p. 167). The synchronous models of empowerment allow the reader to participate in the game and fill in the gaps in the narrative, resulting in the development of pervasive knowledge, language and thought.

**Transient Models of Empowerment in the Film Enola Holmes**

The film adaptation of *Enola Holmes* subjected these mental representations to further contextual reinterpretations. The metaphorical projections that are reflected in the script and the cognitive strategies of Enola’s investigative method were influenced by the contemporary action-adventure adaptation. The film *Enola Holmes*, based on Springer’s first novel, was produced and starred by teen actress Millie Bobbie Brown, directed by Harry Bradbeer, and written by Jack Thorne. Netflix picked it up after theatres shut down due to COVID-19 (Kit, 2020). The popular screen adaptation places even more overt emphasis on girl power than the novel. But how does empowerment manifest itself in light of the transformation of the girl sleuth schema and the narrative conventions of the mystery and detective genre? The adaptation draws on transient models of empowerment perpetuated in social media that are based in ephemeral knowledge and radical discourses. In line with Stephens’s argument that children’s literature is “radically intertextual” and exists “at the intersection of a number of other discourses” (1992, p. 86) as well as taking into account
the “dialogic” and “intertextual” quality of adaptation itself (Stam, 2007; Hutcheon, 2013/2006; McCallum, 2018), I regard the Enola Holmes adaptation as a multiple retelling, a hybrid narrative, and conceptually speaking, an entity in its own right. In accord with Meghann Meeusen’s proposal to consider “some of the ideological implications of consistent patterns that result from the process of adaptation itself” (2020, p. 12), I look at how the Enola Holmes adaptation rewriting the master detective script by introducing the super-sleuth schema. This rewriting impacts the conceptual modelling and cognitive strategies that otherwise define sleuthing as a process of knowledge acquisition and empowerment.

The film Enola Holmes was apparently intended as a transposition but has significantly departed from the novel. The movie as a work of cinematography has gained favourable reviews, whereas the viewership was left divided between the mystery fans who had read the pretexts and those who had not. As one user commented: “If you love Sherlock Holmes, you won’t love this… but if you don’t care about Holmes, you’ll have a great time” (IMDb, 2020). The film’s wittiness and entertainment quality, stellar cast and competent directing have reached the target audience through the conventions of the action-adventure genre: by objectifying knowledge and filling in cognitive gaps, appealing to emotions rather than intellect, and using contemporary discourses of empowerment as a public, rather than a private endeavour.

In the film, the empty private spaces representing cognitive gaps are often filled by Enola’s absent mother, who is present throughout the movie via flashbacks. Eudoria’s disappearance is related to pending societal changes, rather than to her suppressed personal freedom. As a feminist and host to a secret society of women, Enola’s mother is portrayed as a revolutionary character, and even perceived as “dangerous” when explosives are found in her secret meeting place (Bradbeer, 2020, 00:49:09). Similarly, the Tewksbury case concerns the passing of a suffrage-related reform bill in the House of Lords in which the Marquess’s disappearance plays a crucial part. Sixteen-year-old Enola Holmes appears as a young adult heroine, a radical character, and a super-sleuth. Whereas the master detective solves a case by seeing and observing, the special skills of the “girl warrior” in Enola Holmes include the early-twentieth-century practice of “suffrajitsu,” the jiu-jitsu training that suffragettes received prior to World War I in order to resist violent confrontations (Ruz and Parkinson, 2015). The super-sleuth schema, as opposed to the girl sleuth schema of mystery and detective fiction, significantly affects the script and sets an entirely different tone for the story. In the film, Enola’s investigative methods are insufficient to facilitate her transgression into the public sphere. Her corset primarily functions as a combat uniform, and is used to store money only, making Enola’s movements and transgressions much easier and lighter—she does not struggle with the physical constraints of the Victorian corset and the excessive baggage that she ingeniously packed inside it in the novel. Whereas there, the reader can participate by way of observation and their own cognitive resourcefulness, few viewers will be skilled at combat while wearing Victorian garments. Therefore, the empowerment in the film comes from an assertion of power that is exclusive, rather than inclusive, and the viewer becomes a “follower” who is invited to tag along despite the logical and factual inconsistencies. Moreover, Enola’s character in the film “breaks the fourth wall” to fill the gaps in the narrative and occasionally expresses her ideological stance,
which goes beyond the historical context of the Victorian girl sleuth: “I was taught to fight. This is what my mother made me for” (Bradbeer, 2020, 01:34:36–01:34:48). Rather, Enola as a detective is a blend of suffragist and suffragette in London at the time of Jack the Ripper, with the neo-Victorian mise en scène a cultural and ideological pastiche. It is a kind of “mishmash” (Stephens and Geerts, 2014) of various aspects of children’s culture, child-rearing practices, as well as feminist theory and practice from the first wave of feminism, which advocated women’s suffrage, to the fourth wave, which is that of “rebel women,” driven by technologies and the use of social media (Cochrane, 2013). For example, Eudoria Holmes home-schooled Enola by making her read every book in Ferndell Hall’s library, and training her in chess, tennis, archery and the martial arts. Thanks to home-schooling, Eudoria and Enola were “always together” (Bradbeer, 2020, 00:01:18). Enola enjoys complete freedom on their family estate, which is progressive according to both Victorian and contemporary standards. Similarly, Enola’s relationship to her brother is changed, and has even prompted the estate of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to file a lawsuit, because the character of Sherlock Holmes was depicted as too “emotional” (Flood, 2020). With Eudoria and Sherlock Holmes exhibiting their “softer” side, the transgressions in the script indicate a preference for affective factors over internal logic and consistency.

The path of the “super-sleuth” is non-linear and multidimensional, often causing hyper-transgressions into various domains. Accordingly, the abstract concepts in the film are objectified. Thoughts are objects applies to Sherlock Holmes, who “processes his thoughts” (Bradbeer, 2020, 00:15:30); time is an object is expressed in “Our future is up to us,” the only message that Enola’s mother leaves behind (01:56:20). The prevalent idea of “changing the world” implies the elimination of subjectivity (Bratianu, 2015, p. 9) and simplifies the cognitive and artistic skills associated with early feminism and suffrage-related struggle. Because Enola transgresses into the public domain by using super skills and accidentally changes the course of history by enabling Tewksbury to vote for the bill, the film does not just have her draw on her historical context, but she manages to re-shape it at will. In Enola Holmes, knowledge of the world is freely passed on, shared, and adapted, an approach that is not uncommon in the Western understanding of knowledge from the objective and rational perspective (Bratianu, 2015, p. 9), but that contrasts with Enola’s use of private knowledge in the novel. A purposeful life is a journey in Mother’s advice not to be “thrown off course,” “[e]specially by men,” (Bradbeer, 2020, 00:25:49) is the prevailing conceptual metaphor in the film, where the concepts of “girlhood” and “womanhood” are marked by “choosing one’s path.” Under the influence of social media, the adaptation seeks to “update” the pretext, especially in the light of “changing social attitudes towards class or gender” (McCallum, 2018, p. 10), combining liberal feminist, postfeminist, and child activist discourses. As a result, Enola is encouraged to fight her way through rather than seize the opportunity to create novel structures based on experience and cognitive ingenuity as she did in the exploration of private spaces in the book. Because “film adaptations of literary texts for children and young people have […] played, and continue to play, a crucial role in the culture wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (McCallum, 2018, p. 1), the success of the film rests on transient or exclusive models of empowerment that are consistent with the media environment of contemporary adolescent
audiences. In other words, the *Enola Holmes* adaptation relinquishes the strategies of detection connected to conceptual blending and the imagination to embrace the contemporary social media discourses of transient empowerment in which the mind and the context are arbitrarily moulded to suit radical discursive practices. The film character of Enola Holmes demonstrates skills and knowledge that are extraordinary. Thus, in the super-sleuth narrative, empowerment is asserted without tangible proof or rational reasoning, otherwise considered to be the essential elements of mystery and detective stories.

There are several points where the detective script and its conventions diverge in the book and film. Instead of Enola’s list of questions as an exercise in deductive thinking, Sherlock and Enola discuss her childhood toy, “a pine cone wrapped in wool” (Bradbeer, 2020, 00:16:08–00:16:21), making affective factors more prominent than her investigative method. Likewise, Enola’s encounter with Lord Tewksbury at the beginning of her adventure does not constitute a mystery to be solved. Tewksbury, a “useless boy” (Bradbeer, 2020, 00:44:00) needs to be saved by Enola, which corresponds to Meeusen’s findings that “a striking number of contemporary YA film adaptations reverse traditional male/female power dynamics by highlighting a man saved by a woman he loves, and yet binary polarization in these cases nonetheless results in a recreation of unequal power structures” (2020, p. 62). Among much fighting, explosions and a potential romance with Tewksbury, Enola does not solve a single case alone. The revelation that it was Tewksbury’s grandmother who plotted his murder is a surprise to her, whereas Sherlock Holmes arrives at the solution by using observation and logic. Finally, Enola does not set up an actual detective agency, but only verbally declares herself a detective, a decipherer and finder of lost souls, rather than Sherlock Holmes’s ward, or perhaps Lord Tewksbury’s wife.

The super-sleuth schema imbues the master detective script with seemingly effortless transitions into the public domain through the conviction that the sleuth is inherently “extraordinary” and “society can’t control you” (Bradbeer, 2020, 01:23:47). Springer’s neo-Victorian mystery narrative is transformed into a digital playground for “rebel girls” with Enola reflecting the commercial industries’ “com-modification and containment of feminism—the triumph of ‘image power’ over ‘political power’” (Munford, 2007, p. 149). The mystery and detective genre has over the past centuries reflected societal, cultural and ideological changes in children’s culture and beyond. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, we see the super-sleuth crossing boundaries with a purpose. The screen adaptation presents a concept of girl power in a “multivalent” and often contradictory rhetoric (Fritz, 2012, p. 41) that “encompasses a host of cultural phenomena for young women” (Gonick, 2008, p. 310). For Enola as a super-sleuth, the process of becoming a detective happens largely outside of the confinements of Victorian culture and it is turned into a game of “make-believe” rather than a game of detection. Macarena García González problematises “a narrative in which women would access power and spaces considered masculine, but [which] does not invite girls to question the production of difference, the hierarchies of power, or how we produce a life worth telling” (2020, p. 53). Without the cognitive strategies of the investigative method in the foreground, the mental models of the narrative for viewers as followers are a
source of transient accomplishment, mediated knowledge of the world and an objectified experience of being and becoming. Such changes do not necessarily impact the artistic merit of the adaptation, but reflect contemporary Western society’s treatment of knowledge and power as ephemerally shared commodities, instead of the synchronous experience of “the body in the mind” (Johnson, 1987) that the literary girl sleuth Enola Holmes demonstrates when she becomes a professional detective in the Victorian Era.

Conclusion

The mystery and detective genre has often covertly addressed radical issues under the guise of popular and light reading, reflecting developments in (children’s) culture by moving beyond the marginalised categories of society and ideology. This is largely due to its specific type of conceptual modelling which enables active reader participation in the unravelling of the narrative and allows for transgressions into spaces outside the conventional domains. While putting together pieces of a puzzle demands metalinguistic awareness and divergent thinking, the transgressions in the master detective script evoke mental models of empowerment through the progressive acquisition of knowledge, independence and confidence for readers as sleuthing companions. The investigative approach has enabled the entry of the girl sleuth into public spaces and roles of authority and introduced the concept of girl power as early as the pre-second wave feminist era.

The Case of the Missing Marquess draws on detective novel conventions and the historical background of the Sherlock Holmes pretext to construct girl power by means of the girl sleuth schema. Enola’s transition into the public sphere is based on cognitive strategies of conceptual integration and the imagination, resulting in synchronous modelling involving the mind, body and context. However, in the film adaptation Enola Holmes, the contemporary practices of cross-genre adaptation push the boundaries of social identity categories further by employing the action-adventure super-sleuth schema whose path of detection occurs on multiple trajectories, with hyper-transgressions and contextual interventions into the investigative method. Many aspects of the Enola Holmes adaptation relinquish the cognitive strategies of detection for the purpose of hyper-textual explorations and the objectification of knowledge and cognition. The story is therefore indicative of cultural and societal practices that are primarily concerned with the affective engagement of the (child) consumer. Contemporary children’s media and popular digital culture reinforce transient models of girls’ empowerment as a diversion in times of containment in virtual and physical spaces, such as social media profiles and lockdowns. By contrast, for readers of mysteries, empowerment has come from playing the game, connecting clues and solving the case alongside a competent (girl) sleuth. A good detective story reveals a lot about the intricate boundary-crossing practices of children’s culture: who has the power, how power is obtained, and how much power stories hold.
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