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Serial Domestic Noir

Louise Phillips's Kate Pearson Series

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Crime fiction's emergence as a popular genre in twenty-first-century Irish writing is producing critically and commercially successful work of many types, including the political thriller, police procedural, and private eye subgenres. Irish women writers have contributed considerably to the genre's success both within Ireland and on the export markets. Tana French receives a lot of well-deserved attention, but other Irish women are writing novels blending traditional crime fiction subgenres into a popular fusion that is beginning to be called "domestic noir." In a fall 2016 *TLS* review applauding the work of Tana French alongside several British and American writers, Ian Sansom formulates the suspenseful duality of this kind of fiction as "a violent return to life with women as both victims *and* perpetrators."¹ Such a perspective illuminates Louise Phillips's Kate Pearson series, which portrays female characters who are variously victims, perpetrators, and investigators (both official and unofficial). The professional investigations of Phillips's criminal psychologist Dr. Kate Pearson overlap with her personal life and intersect with female characters such as Clodagh McKay in *The Doll's House* (2013) and the titular "Game Changer" of her fourth series novel (2015). My essay's examination of Phillips's series demonstrates how her work offers insight into contemporary Irish society,

1. Sansom, "Only Death," 14.

with particular reference to women's lives and feminist issues, and helps to define the parameters of domestic noir in the face of sometimes-competing demands of series fiction.

Crime fiction is more popular than ever, as evidenced by sales figures, reviews, and the number of first-time authors in the genre. Besides its current popularity, there are good reasons to look to the genre for cultural insight and social commentary. In the context of Nordic crime fiction, one highly visible set of exports, Katrín Jakobsdóttir cites it as “one of the few literary genres which holds the sign of realism aloft and takes up community problems as a subject for debate and examination. But it may be precisely these traits that captivate readers from all around the world.”² Her description of crime fiction from 2011 takes on even greater impact when we realize that this is the same woman who became the prime minister of Iceland in November 2017; she can speak with rare authority about the pertinence of the genre for examining “community problems” in ways that resonate at home and abroad.³ Similar beliefs are expressed by Michael Reynolds, the editor in chief of Europa Editions, a press that makes a lot of international crime fiction in translation available to readers in the United States. Reynolds notes that “world noir confronts broad, global themes through an investigation of international crime in its local manifestations. It does so without ignoring real lives—the individual, the human.”⁴ In Ireland, it has been nearly a decade since Fintan O’Toole pointed to emerging “Irish-set crime writing” as “arguably the nearest thing we have to realist literature adequate to capturing the nature of contemporary society.”⁵

Notably, women writers enjoy a growing preeminence in the still-young field of Irish crime fiction. Declan Burke, author, editor, and influential

2. Jakobsdóttir, “Meaningless Icelanders,” 48.

3. Jakobsdóttir earned an MA from the University of Iceland in 2004 and has taught classes there and at the University of Reykjavík. Her thesis was on Icelandic crime fiction, and she has published articles on Icelandic crime fiction and children’s literature. She was first elected to Parliament in 2007. At the time her essay was published in Nestingen and Arvas’s *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, she was a crime-fiction scholar, writer, and politician.

4. Reynolds, “Preface,” 10.

5. O’Toole, “From Chandler,” 360.

blogger of Irish crime fiction, draws attention to the success of women writers in his introduction to the 2016 New Island Books anthology of short stories by Irish crime writers, *Trouble Is Our Business*. Calling it “one of the most notable trends” of the 2010s, Burke points to women’s dominance in “the number of debut Irish crime novels being published” and their critical success, noting that “the past four winners of the crime fiction gong at the Irish Book Awards have all been women.”⁶ One of these women is Louise Phillips, whose debut novel introducing criminal profiler Kate Pearson, *Red Ribbons* (2012), was nominated for the Best Irish Crime Novel of the Year. The next book in the series, *The Doll’s House*, won the award in 2013, and the third, *Last Kiss* (2014), put Phillips on the short list again. Phillips’s website categorizes the Pearson books as “psychological crime thrillers,” a descriptive label that suggests the mingling of sub-genres characteristic of domestic noir. Given the series’ emphasis on women and children—children as victims and women often as adult survivors of trauma—the suspense, psychological exploration, and criminal justice contexts illuminate contemporary Irish society in important ways.

In *Cyber Ireland: Text, Image, Culture* (2014), Claire Lynch notes that “chick lit” by Maeve Binchy, Marian Keyes, and Cecelia Ahern put Irish genre literature on international bestseller lists in part by using “Irish settings and speech patterns”⁷ to increase their international success. Lynch summarizes their impact by writing that “Keyes’ books are rightly celebrated as contributing to the global industry of popular fiction for women in general, as well as manifesting a consciously Irish model of the genre.”⁸ Those familiar with the growth of Irish crime fiction have not been slow to see the connections between these two popular genres and the way the success of Irish “chick lit” authors prepared the ground for the twenty-first-century wave of Irish crime fiction. John Connolly, an early, important figure in the genre—in 2009 O’Toole unhesitatingly called him “the most successful Irish crime writer”⁹—points to the debt of gratitude Irish

6. Burke, “Editor’s Introduction,” 6.

7. Lynch, *Cyber Ireland*, 97.

8. Lynch, *Cyber Ireland*, 98.

9. O’Toole, “From Chandler,” 359.

crime novelists owe to these women. “Crime authors have cause to thank the writers of women’s popular fiction,” Connolly writes, “for encouraging publishers to look at Irish writers not just as a source of literary fiction but also of genre fiction that can succeed commercially. Once female authors such as Maeve Binchy and Marian Keyes began to appeal to a readership in Britain and the US, they fundamentally altered the perception of Irish writing among international publishers and paved the way for explorations of other genre forms.”¹⁰

All of these factors merge into the kind of genre blending that domestic noir specializes in and that Phillips deploys to such effect in her Kate Pearson series. Ian Sansom’s review mentioned above observes that women’s crime novels from the 1940s and 1950s address “the violence inherent not just in marital but in all family relationships . . . and the possibilities of social as well as sexual transgression.”¹¹ Sansom goes on to link these mid-twentieth-century crime novels by women to “much of the most interesting popular fiction of the past couple of decades,”¹² work that might be classified as domestic noir. Scholarly analysis of such novels has been gaining traction. Earlier scholarly engagement with them generated the concept of “suburban gothic,” a classification that captures several of the key themes and strategies of domestic noir. Groundbreaking work in this area—such as Bernice M. Murphy’s 2009 study, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*—was focused primarily on American primary source material, including not only fiction but also film and other media. Charles L. Crow’s study *American Gothic*, published that same year in the University of Wales Press series on Gothic Literary Studies, also examines the suburban as a gothic setting. Recent developments reflect the advancement of “domestic noir” as both classification and analytical heuristic. The title of the 2018 essay collection edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton, *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, is one

10. Connolly, “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Crime Writers: Ireland and the Mystery Genre,” 56.

11. Sansom, “Only Death,” 14.

12. Sansom, “Only Death,” 14.

indication that both the blended subgenre and its place in scholarly criticism have been established.

Considering the specifically Irish angle on both crime fiction and chick lit, it will come as no surprise that Ireland puts its own stamp on domestic noir.¹³ Revelations about past mistreatment that was covered up, such as the Magdalene laundries, have demonstrated that twentieth-century Ireland was not the safe, pious society it was often claimed to be. Crime fiction such as the psychologically oriented investigations of Louise Phillips's Dr. Kate Pearson series can show how the roots of contemporary crime lie in past abuse that was either papered over or accepted as normal at the time. One example, from *Last Kiss*, addresses this directly. When Kate has located the childhood teacher of Sandra Connolly Regan and Alice Thompson, he talks about the strangeness of their upbringing by Alice's alcoholic mother and Sandra's harsh grandmother (who is later revealed to have done much worse things than treat her granddaughter coldly). When asked if he reported any of what he witnessed to social services, he answers that "a lot has changed in this country in thirty years. When those two girls were children, an alcoholic mother was tolerated, and an unloving one was far too common. They were fed, dressed and sent to school. They got on with their education. That was enough for folk not to meddle."¹⁴ Apart from the scandals attached to institutions, this articulation of the prevailing ethos suggests there was ample room for violence and trauma *within* the home. As Irish journalist and crime writer Gene Kerrigan notes in the preface to his volume of Irish true crime stories, "We place the family at the centre of our constitution, but for some there is no more dangerous place than the home."¹⁵

This is territory within which contemporary Irish women crime novelists have excelled. The current success of Irish crime fiction and the important

13. This is a subject I have explored in essays on Tana French, including a 2014 essay in *Clues* on the dangerous mothers of her first four novels and a 2018 essay in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Joyce and Sutton, which analyzes *The Likeness* and *The Trespasser* in the context of Sheridan Le Fanu, Elizabeth Bowen, and the Tuam babies scandal.

14. Phillips, *Last Kiss*, 355.

15. Kerrigan, *Hard Cases*, 5.

forerunners in chick lit work together to forge a powerful Irish presence in domestic noir. Irish women writers, often deploying female investigators, blur genre boundaries and place traumatic experiences of women and children at the center of their work.¹⁶ Shirley Peterson has shown how Tana French's crime novels "move into the category of trauma novels, balancing subject and method through (often unreliable) first-person narrators, confronting temporal discontinuities and fragmented identity while struggling to assimilate the 'unspeakable' into a coherent causal analysis."¹⁷ Part of what Peterson points to in her analysis is the interaction between the investigator-narrator's interior self and the ongoing investigation. It is no accident that the central characters' own psychological backgrounds and contemporary lives are interwoven with the investigation of the crime plots. Claire McGowan, author of another series featuring a female forensic psychologist, explains in a 2014 *Belfast Telegraph* feature that "I wanted to write a character that wasn't a detective as such, I wanted to be a bit more flexible in what she did. . . . She makes a lot of mistakes in her private life. She is driven and will quite often break the rules."¹⁸ McGowan's description alludes to the deliberate inclusion of the investigator's personal life and background in order to create greater flexibility within the genre.

The Kate Pearson series includes a strong emphasis on the investigator's past, which is excavated for its psychological freight but also comes to bear on present-day events. The formative experience for Kate was being abducted at age twelve. It is a point of motivation for her investigations, and a source of empathy with her patients, victims, and survivors. Initially, she remembers little of the experience. Her memories of it become more complete as the series goes on, however, and by book four it is explored

16. This observation raises the question of women readers, too, but that is beyond the scope of my essay here. As the *Belfast Telegraph* feature on Claire McGowan notes, reflecting McGowan's awareness of these issues in "describing her genre as 'almost women's fiction,' Claire said of her fan base: 'I think there are a lot of women readers. I have had some criticism as there is a lot of looking at personal relationships, but I think the people who read the books enjoy that.'"

17. Peterson, "Voicing the Unspeakable," 109.

18. Fleming, "Crime Pays."

extensively. In *The Game Changer* (2015) it becomes directly connected to her memories of her parents and pertinent to Adam O'Connor's police investigation. The basis of the foundational trauma becomes contextualized and attains direct present relevance within the narrative. In what readers learn of Kate's father's behind-closed-doors behavior, we find another example where, as Peterson puts it in the context of Tana French's crime novels, "a detective's personal trauma is linked to the culture's refusal to address its traumatic past."¹⁹ When crime novelists such as French, McGowan, and Phillips emphasize connections across boundaries of class, age, and professional status, readers can see the commonalities among women's experiences and consider the framework of systems that supposedly protect them. Elizabeth Mannion describes this dynamic at work in Jane Casey's Maeve Kerrigan series: "Commentary, provided largely by Maeve, reveals her own susceptibility to harm, unifying her with women citywide, including victims of crimes she investigates. In addition to emphasizing the vulnerability of young women, this calls into question the distinction between revenge and justice, vigilantism and the rule of law."²⁰ Mannion's point about Kerrigan's shared experience of women's danger in spite of being a police officer has a corollary in series that feature criminal profilers, like McGowan's and Phillips's.

The nature of the profiler's work, delving into psychology and past trauma, allows crime novels featuring profilers to adopt—at least part of the time—a *professional* point of view within the domestic noir. The vision of a trained expert offers an additional level of insight to what might otherwise be merely confusion and pain. Although Kate Pearson is not a member of An Garda Síochána, she works with them in her professional capacity as an independent contractor. She is first introduced as a credentialed, acknowledged expert, and throughout the series readers observe her at work. The first time she is mentioned, in the second chapter of *Red Ribbons*, she is named with her title as "Dr. Kate Pearson." On the occasion of her introduction, she is giving a talk at Maynooth on her experience as

19. Peterson, "Voicing the Unspeakable," 112.

20. Mannion, "Irish by Blood," 121.

a criminal profiler. The idealized depiction of the event underscores Kate's standing: "The conference had been booked to capacity over a month in advance, which meant a packed room of people, all waiting for Kate's talk. . . . The line-up was impressive, featuring some of the best crime writers and criminology academics in the country."²¹ The conference organizer's lengthy introduction of Kate references experience, degrees, and the corroboration of authorities in the United Kingdom and Ireland: "Kate holds a first-class honours degree in Psychology from Trinity College, a Master's in Criminology from University College London and a Doctorate in Forensic Psychology from the University of Nottingham. She has vast experience in the area of criminal profiling, having worked with . . . leading psychologists in the UK. Since her return to Ireland, she has also given some help to An Garda Síochána."²²

In keeping with the emphasis on Kate's expertise, Phillips's novels also incorporate passages explaining important concepts and criminal-psychological research areas. In this way, some of the author's own extensive research is made available to her readers. In addition to extended definitions of concepts such as narcissism and psychopathology, the novels present descriptions of real-world examples of related phenomena, such as (in *The Game Changer*) the Jim Jones cult that resulted in the deaths of nearly a thousand followers in 1978. In *The Doll's House*, readers learn about the sexual assault protocols followed by the Irish police when Kate contacts the officer in charge of a sexual assault investigation she thinks is related to the case on which she is consulting. As a consulting expert, she is given professional respect undiminished by her unfamiliarity with the process the police launch when a victim files a complaint. She can ask that Detective Hennessy "talk [her] through it from the beginning,"²³ an opportunity for readers to learn alongside her.

Kate's talk in the chapter introducing her character concludes with the caution that profilers must "be mindful not to be led in the wrong

21. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 9.

22. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 11.

23. Phillips, *Doll's House*, 260.

direction,”²⁴ an observation that integrates the character’s professional background with the requirements of the crime-fiction genre. Throughout the series, Phillips shows how the investigative methodologies Kate uses parallel those used by the police. As Kate is the primary investigator of the series, often her work is what readers observe as it is happening; in contrast, much of the police work occurs off-page and is reported to Kate. For crime-fiction readers, familiar with the basics of police procedures, the parallels between Kate’s methods and those of the police investigation are evident. She relies not only on her training in psychology but also on the evidence produced by the police: crime scene photos, autopsy results, observations from CCTV footage, and witness statements. She draws everything together using methods similar to those of the police investigation. For example, the extensive “mind maps” she constructs in *The Game Changer* incorporate evidence, observations, questions, and investigative lines. Yet Kate is no armchair detective; in every book she insists on site visits, and she likes to take her own photos. In *Red Ribbons*, Phillips constructs the report that Kate writes for the police.²⁵ Readers have followed Kate’s research process, observing the work that has gone into the report, before being given its full text, marked out from the narrative by its official format and a distinctive font. After that, readers can observe its reception and impact. O’Connor reports that his superiors were dissatisfied with it: “They were hoping for more. What they want to know is what he’ll do next.”²⁶ An annoyed Kate explains, “It doesn’t work like that.” Unlike the investigators, readers are also privy to the interior monologue of the perpetrator, which shows the accuracy of Kate’s work. In some cases, what she presents as a hunch lacking sufficient evidence to go into the formal report is corroborated almost immediately for readers. When she presents the report to O’Connor, she says the killer is trying to “create or recreate an image” and that the posed, buried victims “both looked like angels.”²⁷ O’Connor is weary and openly skeptical, but Phillips gives Kate the victory

24. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 14.

25. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 203–6.

26. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 233.

27. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 220.

when only six pages later readers encounter the killer reflecting on his primary victim “the way he’d left her: safe and sound, looking like a perfect angel.”²⁸

Kate’s role as distinguished expert is complicated at times by the mingling of personal and professional challenges, and sometimes the boundaries between the personal and the professional are noticeably porous. In *Red Ribbons*, Kate is in a strained marriage with a young son. When she is first brought into the investigation, Detective O’Connor’s insistence on including her expertise in the police investigation leads one coworker to inquire, “How’s your Ms Pearson getting along? She’s a real beauty, nice and sweet,” a characterization O’Connor responds to by pointing out that Kate is “a respected criminal psychologist.”²⁹ By the fourth book, her marriage is over, and the affinity she felt with O’Connor has developed into personal partnership: they are living together, and Kate is expecting their child. This personal relationship shows how for women the compartmentalization of the personal and the professional can be difficult to maintain. Some of O’Connor’s colleagues resent the profiler’s role in the investigation, and Kate’s personal relationship with him offers a pretext for resistance. Perhaps more troubling is how O’Connor himself allows his personal relationship with Kate to cast doubt on her professionalism: “A lot depended on how she handled this emotionally and . . . he had his concerns that her normally rational thought processes would win out.”³⁰ Tensions between the professional and personal are further developed through Kate’s growing awareness that not only is her current family in jeopardy but also that her birth family was directly involved in both the older criminal enterprise brought to light *and* the current crimes in *The Game Changer*.

Kate not only decodes violence in her role as profiler, throughout the series she is subject to it. Kate is abducted, attacked, terrorized; her life is regularly put at risk. More than once she is an object of obsession to a perpetrator who stalks her and breaks into her home before directly attacking

28. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 226.

29. Phillips, *Red Ribbons*, 232.

30. Phillips, *Game Changer*, 169.

her. In *Last Kiss*, she finds herself with a knife at her throat as she is forcibly abducted by the killer. Some of these attacks are shocking, even in the context of the genre. In *Red Ribbons*, for example, her young son is abducted with her. In *The Game Changer*, a pregnant Kate is the victim of a planned hit and run: she is on foot, and one of the perpetrator's accomplices drives into her with a car. While such events are not out of place in domestic noir, they begin to put pressure on the conventions of a crime fiction series with its recurring central character. That Kate would be called in to consult on multiple cases in her professional role is plausible; that multiple cases would provide perpetrators who focus on her personally stretches credulity. When the killer in book four is revealed to be a half sister that she never knew she had, a series reader may wonder what could befall Kate in any subsequent case. Perhaps this is partly why the series seems to have ended, with Phillips turning to a new series character, Heather Baxter in *The Hiding Game* (2019).

Phillips also complements the professional perspective provided by Kate's investigations with the related perspectives of other women characters. That all of these contribute to the investigation—and the reader's suspense—is tribute to Phillips's mastery of her complex narrative structure. In *Red Ribbons*, Ellie Brady's memories appear increasingly relevant to the primary criminal investigation. These memories begin to merge with the investigation by way of Dr. Ebbs, Ellie's new doctor at St. Michael's Psychiatric Hospital, where she has been a long-term patient, and part of the suspense comes from readers having to wait for the doctor to take action. In *The Doll's House*, Phillips weaves together the work of Kate and another female character even more directly, without an intermediary figure such as Dr. Ebbs. Clodagh McKay's consultation with a hypnotist provides a different perspective on the recovery of memories that have been fragmented by trauma (such as Kate's own memories of her childhood abduction). The process that readers see Clodagh experience during these sessions overlaps with Kate's treatment of her patient, Imogen, and her analysis of the criminal in the main investigation. Furthermore, readers see how Clodagh's search for answers can mimic Kate's trained investigation, down to Clodagh's search for physical and documentary evidence, her questioning of potential witnesses, and her strategy of voice-recording memories. As the

investigations proceed, Clodagh's investigation and Kate's merge; the multiple points of view Phillips provides throughout the novel come closer and closer together with all, including the killer, converging on the same location: Clodagh's childhood house on the Strand Road, Sandymount. Because the childhood trauma experienced by Clodagh and her brother Dominic lies at the core of the crime, Clodagh has special access to the relevant facts as she explores her memories. At the same time, her close involvement blinds her to possibilities and consequently exposes her to renewed danger. The similarities of their investigations illuminate the profiling process, but their differences emphasize the importance of the trained professional. Kate's expertise, deployed in coordination with that of the Emergency Response Unit's hostage negotiator Anne Holt, brings Clodagh out of danger.

Genre classifications are flexible, and this is particularly true of new genres such as domestic noir. Readers, critics, and scholars identify defining limits when these are approached too closely or even transgressed. Perhaps one sign that the crosscurrents Phillips uses so effectively in her profiler series reaches a kind of tipping point in the fourth novel, *The Game Changer*, is the way Kate herself is analyzed, morphing from doctor into patient. The fragmented memories of her childhood abduction become filled in and linked to the criminal investigation, but more important in terms of the series trajectory is Kate's shift to being the subject of psychological analysis and manipulation. It seems that everyone in *The Game Changer* has an angle on Kate's psychological makeup and behavior, including her father's friend Malcolm; her live-in partner detective Adam O'Connor; and even the perpetrator, who indulges in a lengthy "reflection on Kate's progress"³¹ as she manipulates Kate from afar. Two-thirds of the way into the book, Kate has pathologized herself: "Staring at the mind maps again, she decided the best approach was to separate herself from them, to treat Kate Pearson as a separate entity, someone who was either at the centre or periphery of an investigation. She pressed the red button on her recorder. 'Kate Pearson is the only child of Valentine and Gabrielle

31. Phillips, *Game Changer*, 164.

Pearson.”³² When the eminently well-qualified Dr. Pearson has become so entangled in her past that her present functioning is damaged, it becomes difficult to continue moving the series forward. As a profiler, she works as an independent contractor for specific police investigations; if her authority is diminished, she is likely done consulting for An Garda Síochána. In a one-off domestic noir novel, the female protagonist can wind up completely dysfunctional; in contrast, for a series with a consulting profiler to continue, the profiler must maintain professional credibility. On the other side of the genre divide that the Pearson series bridges, the police procedural, characters can drop in and out of the series, even die or otherwise make permanent exits, without concluding the series; again, this is not practicable for a series with a consulting profiler as principal investigator. In a blended genre like domestic noir, writers will test limits. As more works of domestic noir are published and read, consensus will emerge as to its genre boundaries. The Kate Pearson series helps map the territory as it is currently constituted.

Phillips's series is among those written by Irish women that offer insight into contemporary women's lives by including both challenges and opportunities, and showing their multiple personal and professional roles. These works illustrate David Clark's claim that “of all literary forms, it is crime narrative which has most accurately and most successfully mirrored the profusion of transformations which have taken place in Ireland.”³³ So, for example, readers see Kate's failed marriage and subsequent relationship with a man she met while consulting in a professional capacity. This pattern has meaning in a purely personal context, but it is also more than that. Although not emphasized in the novel as representing cultural change, Kate's home life speaks directly to those issues that frame Irish women's lives. Kate's husband Declan working in Birmingham for a time may be nothing new for Irish families, but their separation and divorce reflects twenty-first-century Ireland. Furthermore, the presence of other female

32. Phillips, *Game Changer*, 302.

33. Clark, “Mean Streets,” 255.

characters whose life experiences intersect with Kate Pearson's allow Phillips to explore topics such as motherhood and child exploitation across multiple sections of society. Finally, this inclusive approach to representation aligns readily with feminist purposes as the investigator turns her circumstances to advantage. Rather than succeeding in spite of them, she is successful precisely because of these overlaps.

In their 2014 special issue of *Éire-Ireland* on Irish Crime since 1921, coeditors William Meier and Ian Campbell Ross write that its contents indicate "areas for further research that would insert Ireland into major academic conversations about deviance, theories of crime and punishment, and the relationship between crime and society. The rapid growth of crime fiction, true crime, and television programming suggests an urgent need for more extensive critical inquiry."³⁴ As Irish crime fiction continues to develop, and the genre of domestic noir consolidates its recent gains, the Kate Pearson series offers us insight into genre, culture, and women's issues. Internationally successful crime fiction by authors like Louise Phillips provides guideposts as the slower workings of scholarship begin to catch up with the flourishing primary literature.

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34. Meier and Campbell, "Editors' Introduction," 15.

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