Miss Maude Silver, Miss Jane Marple, where are you, with your splendid and authoritative bosoms, your discreet inquiries, natural reticence and cunning powers of deduction? Oh, a long way from these sisters in crime.

The most aggressive of the female sleuths in this trinity of novels is Lindy Cameron’s Kit O’Malley, an ex-cop turned private investigator. Her signature — all sleuths must have one — is her homosexuality. Kit’s a spunky, street-smart dyke from Melbourne’s underworld, which in this case features the Rileys, a notorious crime family headed by a formidable matriarch, Queenie Riley. Kit and her girlfriend, Alex, have fantastic sex and don’t play games with each other. Unfortunately, along with the Kit O’Malley smarts comes her use of the vernacular. Kit has a nasty habit of saying ‘Hell-o!’, as in ‘Wake up!’

Then there is Lee Tulloch’s Heidi Go, a beautiful Eurasian who has moved to the seaside town of Nullin with her screenwriter partner, Beckett. Heidi is so gorgeous that men are constantly making passes at her, especially when she walks into their motel rooms with her massage table. Heidi is a bona fide masseuse with a herb for every symptom. An incredible stickybeak, she quickly becomes embroiled in the town’s richest family, the town’s Neanderthal family and the town’s hippy family. Her sex life can be good, too, but, unlike Kit, Heidi and her partner are given to misunderstandings, jealousy and rows.

But the sleuth who most appealed to me is Kerry Greenwood’s Phryne Fisher, maybe because she has had more adventures than the other girls (this is only Kit’s third book and Heidi’s first). Phryne has buckets of sang-froid when it comes to detection. While heroes these days simply stagger about with masses of self-doubt, Phryne has the healthiest self-esteem I’ve come across since Scarlett O’Hara. She is beautiful, of course, slim, and has the dark, bobbed hair of a flapper. Phryne’s home turf is Melbourne in the 1920s. She lives on inherited wealth and has excellent staff who adore her and cook wonderful meals. (*The Castlemaine Murders* easily has the best food and drink, including the recipe for ‘Mr...
Butler’s ‘Considering Cocktail’). Phryne has two adopted daughters and no stretch marks. The daughters don’t seem to give her any trouble whatsoever and are intelligent and obliging. Phryne also has a Chinese lover and is so independent and organised that she is able to enjoy her lover as she relishes her meals. No guilt, either. Not even about the cigarettes, delicious wines or nips of cognac.

There’s nothing twee or unassuming about these sleuths. They are all fully occupied doing somersaults, competing for the reader’s attention. Given that female crime fiction is such a crowded genre, much depends not only on the agility of the sleuth but also on the attractiveness of the setting. We expect that crime writers will take us to places where we can find interest and fun, or sometimes familiar territory. Our choice of crime, at the end of the day, is a subjective one, depending very much on where we are as readers: how insistent we are on clean sentences and what our interests are — Eng Lit? forestry? strip clubs? convents? Most stones have been turned.

As far as background is concerned, each of Greenwood’s books contains large slices of research, but it is elegantly placed within the general context of the story. After discovering her corpse in Luna Park, Phyrne drives to Castlemaine in her Hispano-Suiza to pursue her investigations. She stays at the Imperial Hotel where she enjoys a bottle of red that has been spared the phylloxera epidemic. Her lover, Lin Chung, is also in Castlemaine, unravelling a family mystery. Given the vestigial prejudices against the Chinese, Lin Chung takes the precaution of disguising himself as a clergyman. Greenwood does more than describe what Castlemaine looked like in the 1920s; she tells us of the pride of the inhabitants, as well as their bigotry, and she enables us to enjoy the smell of a fresh Castlemaine morning.

Tulloch is also assured when it comes to evoking place. She nicely subverts the notion of the cute locals when describing her coastal town. Heidi and her husband have done the typical city slicker trick of buying the white elephant that the locals wouldn’t touch, in their case a disused butter factory.

In comparison, Cameron’s Melbourne is rushed, crowded and confusing. Kit rarely slows down as she hurtles down freeways, side streets and tawdry nightclubs. This busyness chokes the novel, both in terms of setting and action.

Where and in what condition the body is discovered — generally, within the first few chapters — can also distinguish a crime novel. Kit O’Malley finds her body, a man who was related to the Rileys, in a huge dish in a lesbian night club. His naked body has been deliberately drained of all blood. Phyrne Fisher is at Luna Park with her family enjoying the Ghost Train when the boot of a dummy comes off in her hand. Inside the boot are the bones and skin of a mummified corpse. Heidi Go finds her body in a disused quarry; it is that of a young girl who has been lashed to a timber frame and impaled on a long spear.

So busy are these crime writers shocking the reader and developing character and place that the ingredient usually considered integral to the crime novel, suspense, is almost inconsequential. While Cameron’s book has scene after scene of climactic incidents, it fails to build to a climax. Greenwood, too, enthrals us with décor, history and wit, but the whodunit element seems almost irrelevant. The writer with the most powerful climax is Tulloch, who keeps us hanging as Heidi’s life is held in jeopardy. She also cares about how that poor girl managed to get herself impaled like that.

Apart from providing colour, the imperative of the crime sleuth was, traditionally, to gather suspects, observe their behaviour and look for motives. Perhaps Miss Marple does have a successor here after all. Heidi Go applies her knowledge of the village genealogy to solve the crime. Like Miss Marple, she is innocent of any police training and relies on intuition and finely tuned powers of observation.

Organisations such as Sisters in Crime Australia claim as part of their charter the need to correct the imbalance in the treatment of women in the field. This is odd, given that Australian female writers and female sleuths are prolific and popular, and that the writing, as evidenced by these three novels, is generally rich and entertaining.

In fact, so bountiful and successful are the crime books that flow from these women that you wonder where they get their sense of injustice from. A vivid imagination?